

THE 13TH REALITY

THE JOURNAL OF CURIOUS LETTERS



JAMES DASHNER

The 13th Reality, Volume 1

Journal of Curious Letters

James Dashner



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All characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

This book is dedicated to my wife, Lynette,

and to our mothers, Linda Dashner and Patti Anderson.

Thank you for making my life so far
a wonderful thing to have lived.

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Summary: Thirteen-year-old Atticus “Tick” Higginbottom begins receiving
mysterious letters from around the world signed only “M.G.,”
and the clues contained therein lead him on a journey to the perilous
13th Reality and a confrontation with evil Mistress Jane.

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Part 1
The Fire

Master George and Mistress Jane

Norbert Johnson had never met such strange people in all of his life, much less two on the same day—within the same *hour* even. Odd. Very odd indeed.

Norbert, with his scraggly gray hair and his rumpled gray pants and his wrinkly gray shirt, had worked at the post office in Macadamia, Alaska, for twenty-three years, seven months, twelve days, and—he looked at his watch—just a hair short of four hours. In those long, cold, lonesome years he'd met just about every type of human being you could imagine. Nice people and mean people. Ugly people and pretty people. Lawyers, doctors, accountants, cops. Crazies and convicts. Old hags and young whippersnappers. Oh, and lots of celebrities, too.

Why, if you believed his highfalutin stories (which most people quit doing about twenty-three years, seven months, twelve days, and *three* hours ago), you'd think he'd met every movie and music star in America. Though exactly *why* these famous folks were up in Alaska dropping off mail was anybody's guess, so it may have been a slight exaggeration of the truth.

But today's visitors were different, and Norbert knew he'd have to convince the town that this time he was telling the truth and nothing but the truth. Something scary was afoot in Macadamia.

The first stranger, a man, entered the small, cramped post office at precisely 11:15 a.m., quickly shutting the door against the blustery wind and swirling snowflakes. In doing so, he almost dropped a cardboard box full of letters clutched in his white-knuckled hands.

He was a short, anxious-looking person, shuffling his feet and twitching his nose, with a balding red scalp and round spectacles perched on his ruddy, puffy face. He wore a regal black suit: all pinstripes and silk and gold cuff links.

When the man plopped the box of letters onto the post office counter with a loud flump, a cloud of dust billowed out; Norbert coughed for several seconds. Then, to top everything off, the stranger spoke with a heavy English accent like he'd just walked out of a Bill Shakespeare play.

“Good day, sir,” he said, the faintest attempt at a smile creasing his face into something that looked like pain. “I do hope you would be so kind as to offer me some assistance in an important matter.” He pulled a lace-edged handkerchief from within the dark recesses of his fancy suit and wiped his brow, beads of sweat having formed there despite the arctic temperatures outside. It was, after all, the middle of November.

“Yessir,” Norbert answered, ready to fulfill his duty as Postal Worker Number Three. “Mighty glad to help.”

The man pointed outside. “Simply dreadful, isn’t it?”

Norbert looked through the frosted glass of the front door, but saw only the snow-swept streets and a few pedestrians bundled up and hurrying to get out of the cold. “What’s dreadful, sir?”

The man huffed. “By the Wand, man, this place, this *place!*” He put away his hanky and folded his arms, exaggerating a shiver up and down his body. “How can you chaps stand it—the bitter cold, the short daylight, the biting wind?”

Norbert laughed. “I take it you’re just a-visiting?”

“Visiting?” The sharply dressed man barked something between a laugh and a snort. “There’ll be no visiting from me, my good man. The instant these letters are off, I’ll be heading back to the ocean. The very *instant*, I assure you.”

The ocean? Norbert eyed the man, a little offended by the stranger’s dislike of the only town where Norbert had ever set foot. “Well, sir, how long you been here?”

“How long?” The man looked at his golden pocket watch. “How *long*? Approximately seven minutes, I’d say, and that’s far too long already. I’m, er, eager to be on my way, if you don’t mind.” He scratched his flaky red scalp. “Which reminds me—is there a cemetery closer than the one down by the frozen riverside?”

“A cemetery?”

“Yes, yes, a cemetery. You know, where they bury poor chaps with unbeating hearts?” When Norbert only stared, the man sighed. “Oh, never mind.”

Norbert remembered hearing the word *befuddled* once on television. He had never been quite sure what it meant, but something told him it explained exactly how he felt at that moment. He scratched his chin, squinting at the odd little man. “Sir, may I ask your name?”

“No, you may not, Mister Postman. But if you must call me something, you may call me Master George.”

“Alrighty then,” Norbert said, his tone wary. “Uh, Master George, you’re a-telling me you just arrived here in Macadamia seven minutes ago?”

“That’s right. Please—”

Norbert ignored him. “And you’re a-telling me you come all this way just to mail these here letters, and then you’re a-going to up and leave again?”

“Egads, yes!” Master George squeezed his hands together and rocked back and forth on his heels. “That is, if you’d be so kind as to . . .” He motioned to

the box of letters, raising his thin eyebrows.

Norbert shook his head. "Well, how'd you get here?"

"By . . . er, plane, if you must know. Now, really, why so many questions?"

"You got yourself your own plane?"



Master George slammed his hand against the counter. “Yes! Is this a post office or a trial by jury? Now, please, I’m in a great hurry!”

Norbert whistled through his teeth, not taking his eyes off Master George as he slid the box closer to him. Then, reluctantly, Norbert looked down, a little worried the stranger might disappear once they broke eye contact.

The box was filled to the rim with hundreds of envelopes, yellowed and crumpled like they’d been trampled by a herd of buffalo, the addresses scrawled across the wrinkly paper in messy blue ink. Each frumpy envelope also bore a unique stamp—some of which looked to be rare and worth serious money: an Amelia Earhart, a Yankee Stadium, a Wright Brothers.

Norbert looked back up at the man. “So, you flew in your own plane to the middle of Alaska in the middle of November to deliver these letters . . . and then you’re heading back home?”

“Yes, and I’ll be sure to tell Scotland Yard that if they’re in need of a detective to ring you straight away. Now, good sir, is there anything else I have to do? I want to make absolutely sure there will be no problem in the delivery of these letters.”

Norbert shrugged, then shuffled through the stack of envelopes, verifying they all had stamps and proper addresses. The letters were destined to go everywhere from Maine to California, from France to South Africa. Japan. China. Mexico. They were headed all over the world. And by the looks of it, the man had estimated the required postage to perfection.

“Well, I’ll have to weigh each one and type the location into the computer, but they look all right to me on first glance. You wantin’ to stick around while I check them all?”

Master George slipped a fat wallet out of his jacket pocket. “Oh, I assure you the necessary postage is there, but I must be certain. Here.” He pulled out several hundred-dollar bills and placed them on the counter. “If you find that additional postage is required, this should be more than sufficient to pay in full. Consider the rest as a tip for your valuable service.”

Norbert swallowed the huge lump in his throat. “Uh, sir, I can tell you right now it won’t take nearly that much. Not even close.”

“Well, then, I will return home feeling very satisfied indeed.” He squinted at Norbert’s name tag before tipping his head in a formal bow. “I bid you farewell, Norbert, and wish you the very best.”

And with that, Master George slipped back out into the frigid air.

Norbert had a sneaking suspicion he’d never see the man again.

~

Norbert had just placed the box of odd letters on a shelf under the front desk when an even stranger character than the finely appareled English

gentleman stepped into the quiet post office. When the woman walked in the door, Norbert's mouth dropped open.

She wore nothing but yellow—her floor-length dress, her heavy overcoat, her pointy-toed shoes, her tightly fitted gloves. She pushed back the hood of her coat, revealing a bald head that shone as bright as a chrome ball, a pair of horn-rimmed glasses perched on her steep ridge of a nose, and eyes the color of burning emeralds.

She looked like a lemon that had been turned into an evil sorceress; Norbert surprised himself when he chuckled out loud before she said a word. By the way her eyes narrowed into green laser points, Norbert figured that wasn't the smartest thing he'd done in a while.

"Something funny, mailman?" she asked, her voice soft and seductive, yet somehow filled with a subtle hint of warning. Unlike Master George, she had no accent Norbert recognized—she could've been from any city in Alaska. Well, except for the fact that she looked like a walking banana.

After a long moment with no response, she continued, "You'll find that Mistress Jane doesn't react kindly to those who mock her."

"Um," Norbert stuttered. "Uh, who . . . who is Mistress Jane?" As soon as he said it, he knew he must sound like an idiot.

"Me, you blubbering fool. Are you daft?"

"No, ma'am, I can hear just fine."

"Not *deaf*, you moronic stack of soiled snow, daft—*daft*. Oh, never mind." She took a step closer, placing her gloved hands on the counter right in front of Norbert. Her eyes seemed to have tracking beams focused on his own, pulling his gaze into a trance. "Now listen to me, mailman, and listen to me well. Understand?"

Norbert tried to utter agreement, but managed only a small squeak. He nodded instead.

"Good." She straightened and folded her arms. "I'm looking for a little stuff-bucket of a man—red-faced, ugly, more annoying than a ravenous mouse in a cheese factory. I know he came here just minutes ago, but I *don't* know if I'm in the correct Reality. Have you seen him?"

Norbert called upon every ounce of willpower in his feeble little body to hold his face still, hiding all expression. He forced his eyes to focus on the Lemon Lady's bald head and to not let them wander to the box of letters on the shelf at his feet. He didn't have a single clue what was going on with these two strangers, but every instinct told him Master George equaled good, Mistress Jane equaled bald—he blinked—uh, *bad*.

What does she mean about being in the correct reality, anyway? Norbert marveled that two such interesting people could enter his tiny post office within a half hour of each other.

“Polar bear got your tongue—?” Mistress Jane asked with a sneer, glancing down at his name badge. “Norbie? Anybody in there?”

Norbert ignored his racing heart and simply said, “No.”

“No what?” the yellow woman snapped. “No, you’re not in there, or no, the man I’m looking for didn’t come here?”

“Ma’am, you’re my first customer of the day, and no, I’ve a-never seen any such person as you described in my life.”

Mistress Jane frowned, held a finger up to her chin. “Do you know what Mistress Jane does with liars, Norbie?”

“I’m not a-lying, ma’am,” Norbert answered, trying his best to look calm. He didn’t like fibbing to such a scary woman—and crossing his fingers under the counter wouldn’t amount to a hill of beans if she found out—but somehow he just knew that if this evil lady wanted to stop Master George from doing whatever he was trying to do, then those letters needed to get in the mail, no matter what. And it was all up to Norbert Johnson.

The lady looked away as if lost in deep thought over what she should do next. “I know he’s up to something,” she whispered, barely audible and not really speaking to Norbert anymore. “But which Reality . . . I don’t have time to look in them all . . .”

“Miss Jane?” Norbert asked. “May I—”

“It’s *Mistress* Jane, you Alaskan ice head.”

“Oh, uh, I’m awfully sorry—I just wanted to know if there’s any postal service you’ll be a-needing today.”

The nasty woman looked at him for a long time, saying nothing. Finally, “If you’re lying to me, I’ll find out and I’ll come back for you, *Norbie*.” She reached into the pocket of her overcoat, fidgeting with something hidden and heavy. “And you won’t like the consequences, I can promise you that.”

“No, ma’am, I’m sure—”

Before he could finish his sentence, though, the last and by far *most* bizarre thing of the day occurred.

Mistress Jane disappeared.

She vanished—into thin air, as they say. *Poof*, like a magic trick. One second there, the next second gone.

Norbert stared at the empty space on the other side of the counter, knowing he needed a much stronger word than *befuddled* to explain how he felt now. Finally, shaking his head, he reached down and grabbed the box containing Master George’s letters.

“These are going out *tonight*,” he said, though no one was in the room to hear him.

A Very Strange Letter

Atticus Higginbottom—nicknamed “Tick” since his first day of kindergarten—stood inside the darkness of his own locker, cramped and claustrophobic. He desperately wanted to unlatch the handle and step out, but he knew he had to wait five more minutes. The edict had been decreed by the Big Boss of Jackson Middle School in Deer Park, Washington. And what Billy “The Goat” Cooper commanded must be obeyed; Tick didn’t dare do otherwise.

He peeked through the metal slats of the door, annoyed at how they slanted down so he could only see the dirty white tiles of the hallway. The bell ending the school day had rung ages ago and Tick knew that by now most of the students would be outside, waiting for their buses or already walking home. A few stragglers still roamed the hallways, though, and one of them stopped in front of Tick’s jail cell, snickering.

“Hope you get out before suppertime, Icky Ticky Stinkbottom,” the boy said. Then he kicked the locker, sending a terrible *bang* of rattled metal echoing through Tick’s ears. “The Goat sent me to make sure you hadn’t escaped yet—good thing you’re still in there. I can see your beady little eyes.” Another kick. “You’re not *crying* are you? Careful, you might get snot on your Barf Scarf.”

Tick squeezed his eyes shut, steeled himself to ignore the idiot. Eventually, the bullies always moved on if he just stayed silent. Talking back, on the other hand . . .

The boy laughed again, then walked away.

In fact, Tick was *not* crying and hadn’t done so in a long time. Once he’d learned to accept his fate in life as the kid everyone liked to pick on, his life had become a whole lot easier. Although Tick’s attitude seemed to annoy Billy to no end. *Maybe I should fake a cry next time*, Tick thought. *Make the Goat feel like a big bad king.*

When the hall had grown completely still and silent, Tick reached down and flicked the latch of the door. It swung open with a loud *pop* and slammed against the locker next to it. Tick stepped out and stretched his cramped legs and arms. He couldn’t have cared less about Billy and his gang of dumb bullies right then—it was Friday, his mom and dad had bought him the latest gaming system for his thirteenth birthday, and the Thanksgiving holidays

were just around the corner. He felt perfectly happy.

Glancing around to make sure no one had hung around to torture him some more, Tick adjusted the red-and-black striped scarf he always wore to hide the hideous purple blotch on his neck—an irregular, rusty-looking birthmark the size of a drink coaster. It was the one thing he hated most about his body, and no matter how much his parents tried to convince him to lose the scarf, he wore it every hour of every day—even in the summer, sweat soaking through in dark blotches. Now, with winter settling in with a vengeance, people had quit giving him strange looks about the security blanket wrapped around his neck. Well, except for the jerks who called it the Barf Scarf.

He set out down the hall, heading for the door closest to the street that led to his house; he lived within walking distance of the school, which was lucky for him because the buses were long gone. He rounded the corner and saw Mr. Chu, his science teacher, step out of the teacher’s lounge, briefcase in hand.

“Well, if it isn’t Mr. Higginbottom,” the lanky man said, a huge smile on his face. “What are you still doing around here? Anxious for more homework?” His straight black hair fell almost to his shoulders. Tick knew his mom would say Mr. Chu needed a haircut, but Tick thought he looked cool.

Tick gave a quick laugh. “No, I think you gave us plenty—I’ll be lucky to get half of it done by Monday.”

“Hmmm,” Mr. Chu replied. He reached out and swatted Tick on the back. “If I know you, it was done by the end of lunchtime today.”

Tick swallowed, for some reason embarrassed to admit his teacher was exactly right. *So, I’m a nerd*, he thought. *One day it’ll make me filthy dirty rotten rich*. Tick was grateful that at least he didn’t really look the part of a brainy nerd. His brown hair wasn’t greasy; he didn’t wear glasses; he had a solid build. His only real blemish was the birthmark. And maybe the fact that he was as clumsy as a one-legged drunk. But, as his dad always said, he was no different from any other kid his age and would grow out of the clumsiness in a few years.

Whatever the reason, Tick just didn’t get along with people his own age. He found it hard to talk to them, much less be friends. Though he did *want* friends. Badly. *Poor little me*, he thought.

“I’ll take your lack of a smart-aleck response—and the fact you aren’t holding any books—as proof I’m right,” Mr. Chu said. “You’re too smart for the seventh grade, Tick. We should really bump you up.”

“Yeah, so I can get picked on even *more*? No, thanks.”

Mr. Chu’s face melted into a frown. He looked at the floor. “I hate what those kids do to you. If I could . . .”

“I know, Mr. Chu. You’d beat ’em up if it weren’t for those pesky lawsuits.” Tick felt relieved when a smile returned to his teacher’s face.

“That’s right, Tick. I’d put every one of those slackers in the hospital if I could get away with it. Bunch of no-good louses—that’s what they are. In fifteen years, they’ll all be calling you *boss*. Remember that, okay?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Why don’t you run on home, then. I bet your mom’s got some cookies in the oven. See you Monday.”

“Okay. See ya, Mr. Chu.” Tick waved, then hurried down the hall toward home.

He only tripped and fell once.

~

“I’m home!” Tick yelled as he shut the front door. His four-year-old sister, Kayla, was playing with her tea set in the front room, her curly blonde hair bouncing with every move. She sat right next to the piano, where their older sister Lisa banged out some horrific song that she’d surely blame on the piano being out of tune. Tick dropped his backpack on the floor and hung his coat on the wooden rack next to the door.

“What’s up, Tiger?” his mom said as she shuffled into the hallway, pushing a string of brown hair behind her ear. The cheeks of her thin face were red from her efforts in the kitchen, small beads of sweat hanging on for dear life along her forehead. Lorena Higginbottom loved—absolutely *loved*—to cook and everyone in Deer Park knew it. “I just put some cookies in the oven.”

Righto, Mr. Chu.

“Mom,” Tick said, “people stopped calling each other ‘Tiger’ a long time before I was born. Why don’t you just call me ‘Tick’? Everyone else does.”

His mom let out an exaggerated sigh. “That’s the worst nickname I’ve ever heard. Do you even know what a tick *does*?”

“Yeah, it sucks your blood right before you squish it dead.” Tick pressed his thumb against his pant leg, twisting it with a vicious scowl on his face. Kayla looked up from her tea set, giggling.

“Lovely,” Mom said. “And you have no problem being named after such a creature?”

Tick shrugged. “Anything’s better than Atticus. I’d rather be called . . . *Wilbur* than Atticus.”

His mom laughed, even though he could tell she tried not to.

“When’s Dad gonna be home?” Tick asked.

“The usual, I’d guess,” Mom replied. “Why?”

“He owes me a rematch in Football 3000.”

Mom threw her arms up in mock desperation. “Oh, well, in that case, I’ll call and tell him it’s an emergency and to get his tail right home.”

Lisa stopped playing her music, much to Tick’s relief, and, he suspected, to the relief of every ear within a quarter mile. She turned around on the piano bench to look at Tick, her perfect teeth shining in an evil grin. Wavy brown hair framed a slightly pudgy face like she’d never quite escaped her baby fat. “Dad whipped you by five touchdowns last time,” she said sweetly, folding her arms. “Why don’t you give up, already?”

“Will do, once you give up beating that poor piano with a hatchet every day. Sounds like an armless gorilla is playing in there.”

Instead of responding, Lisa stood up from the piano bench and walked over to Tick. She leaned forward and gave him a big kiss on the cheek. “I wuv you, wittle brother.”

“I think I’m gonna be sick, Mom,” Tick groaned, wiping his cheek. “Could you get me something to clean my face?”

Lisa folded her arms and shook her head, her eyes set in a disapproving stare. “And to think I used to change your diaper.”

Tick barked a fake laugh. “Uh, sis, you’re two years older than me—pretty sure you never changed my diaper.”

“I was very advanced for my age. Skilled beyond my years.”

“Yeah, you’re a regular Mozart—well, except for the whole music thing.”

Mom put her hands on her hips. “You two are just about the silliest kids I’ve ever—” A loud buzz from the kitchen cut her off. “Ah, the cookies are done.” She turned and scuttled off toward the kitchen.

Kayla screamed something unintelligible then ran after her mom with a huge smile planted on her face, dropping tea cups all over the floor and hallway.

Tick looked at Lisa and shrugged. “At least she’s not burning things.” Kayla had been caught several times at the living room fireplace, laughing with glee as she destroyed important objects in the flames. Tick headed for the staircase. “I’ll be back in a minute—gotta use the bathroom.”

“Thanks for sharing *that* bit of exciting news,” Lisa quipped as she followed Kayla toward the kitchen.

Tick had his hand on the banister when his mom called back for him. “Oh, I almost forgot. You got a letter in the mail today. It’s on your bed.”

“Ooh, maybe it’s a *love* letter,” Lisa said, blowing a kiss at Tick.

Tick ignored her and ran up the stairs.

~

The bed squeaked as Tick flopped down next to his pillow where a tattered

yellow envelope rested, his full name—Atticus Higginbottom—and address scrawled across it in messy handwriting. The stamp was an old picture of the Eiffel Tower but the postmark smeared on top of it said, “Macadamia, Alaska.” The upper left corner of the envelope had no return address. He picked up the envelope and flipped it over—nothing there either. Curious, he stared at the mysterious letter for a moment, racking his brain. Who could possibly have written him from the state of Alaska? No one came to mind.

He wedged his finger under the sealed flap on the back and ripped the envelope open. A simple rectangle of white cardstock that barely fit in the envelope held a long message on one side, typed by what appeared to be an old-fashioned typewriter. Baffled, Tick pulled the card out and began to read.

Dear Master Atticus,

I am writing to you in hopes that you will have the courage of heart and the strength of mind to help me in a most dreadful time of need. Things are literally splitting apart at the seams, as it were, and I must find those who can assist me in some very serious matters.

Beginning today (the fifteenth of November), I am sending out a sequence of special messages and clues that will lead you to an important, albeit dangerous, destiny if you so choose. No, dangerous may not be a strong enough word. Indubitably and despicably deadly--yes, that's better.

I will say nothing further. Oh, except several more things. If ever you want the madness to stop, you need only to burn this letter. I'll know when you do and shall immediately cease and desist.

However, if this letter remains intact for one week after you receive it, I will know you have chosen to help me, and you will begin receiving the Twelve Clues.

Know this before you decide, my friend: Many, many lives are at stake. Many. And they depend entirely on this choice that you must make. Will you have the courage to choose the difficult path?

Do be careful. Because of this letter, very frightening things are coming your way.

Most faithfully yours,

M.G.

P.S. I recognize that, like most young people, you probably love

sweetened milk and peppermint sticks. Unfortunately, I have neither the time nor practical means to send you any as a welcoming gift. Please do not think me unkind. Good day.

Tick stared at the letter for ten minutes, reading it over and over, wondering who could've played such a trick. His sister Lisa? No—he couldn't see her using words like “despicably” and “indubitably.” His mom or dad? Certainly not. What would be the point? Tick had no true friends to speak of, so the only other option was that it was a trick from the bullies at school. But again, such an idea made no sense. Plus, how would anyone he knew manage to get an Alaskan postmark on the envelope?

His dad did have an old aunt who lived up there somewhere, but Tick had never even met the lady as far as he could remember, and doubted she even knew he existed. Plus, Tick didn't think her initials were M.G.

A knock at the door snapped his attention away—his mom wondering why he hadn't come down for cookies. Tick mumbled something about not feeling well, which was far truer than he liked to admit.

It couldn't be for real. It had to be a scam or a joke. It *had* to be.

And yet, as the purple and orange glow of twilight faded into black darkness, Tick still lay on his bed, contemplating the letter, ignoring his growing hunger. He felt hypnotized by M.G.'s message. Eventually, no closer to understanding or believing, he fell asleep to the soft hum of the central heating.

But in his dreams, he kept seeing the same words over and over, like a buzzing neon sign on a haunted hotel:

Very frightening things are coming your way.

A Kid's Worst Nightmare

Tick woke up to the wonderful sound and smell of sizzling bacon, coupled with the uncomfortable sensation of sliding down a mountain. By the time he shook his head and burned the cobwebs of sleep away, he realized his dad had taken a seat on the edge of the bed, making the mattress lean considerably in that direction.

Tick tried not to smile. Edgar Higginbottom was a tad on the heavy side. Certainly with his pale skin, scraggly hair, and a nose the size of Rhode Island, he didn't qualify as the most handsome man on the planet, but whatever the big guy lacked in looks, he more than made up for in kindness and humor. Tick thought his dad was the coolest person on the planet.

"Morning, Professor," Dad said in his gravelly voice. Everyone in the family joked that Tick might be the smartest one living in the house, so his dad had taken to calling him *Professor* a long time ago. "Gee, I came home last night all ready to take you down in Football 3000 again, but you're up here dead to the world. I even brought a movie home for us to watch. You sick?"

"No, I just didn't feel that great last night." Tick rolled over, slyly pushing the envelope and mysterious letter farther under his pillow. Luckily, his dad hadn't seen it. Tick didn't know what he was going to do when his mom asked about it. In the brightness of the morning, it almost felt like the letter had been a dream or a prank after all; though he couldn't wait to read it again.

"Well, you look like three days of rough road if you want to know the truth," his dad said. "You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. What time is it?"

"Ten-thirty."

Tick sat up in bed. "Serious?" He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept in so long. "It's really ten-thirty?"

"No."

"Oh." Tick fell back on the bed.

"It's ten-thirty-six," Dad said with his patented wink.

Tick groaned and pressed his hands over his eyes. It didn't seem like it should be a big deal, but for some reason it bothered him that the letter from Alaska had drained his brain so much that he'd slept for more than twelve hours.

“Son, what on earth is wrong with you?” Dad put his hand on Tick’s shoulder and squeezed. “I’m pretty close to calling the Feds and telling them an alien’s kidnapped my son and replaced him with a half-baked clone.”

“Dad, you watch way too many sci-fi movies. I’m fine, I promise.”

“It’s been at least seven years since I’ve seen a movie without *you*, big guy.”

“Good point.” Tick looked over at his window, where a fresh batch of snow curtained the bottom edges. The sight made him shiver.

Dad stood and held out a hand. “Come on, it’s not too late for breakfast. Mom made her famous puffed-oven-pancakes. Let’s get down there before Kayla tries to throw them in the fireplace again.”

Tick nodded and let his dad help him up, then followed him out of the room, the whole time thinking about the letter and wanting desperately to tell someone about it.

Not yet, he thought. They might think I’m crazy.

~

“So what was that letter all about?” his mom asked. The whole family sat at the kitchen table, little Kayla next to Tick, her hands already sticky after only one bite.

Tick’s hand froze halfway on its journey to put the first chunk of puffy pancake, dripping with hot syrup, into his hungry mouth. He’d hoped his mom had somehow forgotten about the mystery letter; he’d failed to come up with a plan on what to say.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” he said, then stalled for time by popping the bite into his mouth and chewing. He lifted his glass of cold milk and took a long drink, his mind spinning for an answer. “You know that Pen Pal Web site I subscribed to a while back?”

“Oh, yeah!” Mom replied, lowering her own fork. “You never told us how that went—did you finally find someone?” The Pen Pal site took a bunch of data from kids all around the world and then matched them up as writing buddies with others kids their same age and with the same interests. A parent had to approve it, of course, and Tick’s mom had done just that, giving the company all kinds of information and filling out a million forms. Maybe it wasn’t too far of a stretch to think one of the pen pals might want to send a letter via regular mail instead of e-mail. It was Tick’s only chance.

“Maybe,” Tick mumbled through another huge bite. He stared at his plate, hoping she’d move on to grill one of his sisters about something else. She didn’t.

“All the way from Alaska,” she continued. “Is it a boy or a girl?”

“Uh . . . I don’t know actually. Whoever it was just signed it M.G.”

“Alaska, huh?” Dad said. “Hey, maybe your pen pal knows old Aunt Mabel up in Anchorage. Wouldn’t that be something?”

“I highly doubt it,” Mom answered. “That woman probably hasn’t set foot out of her house in ten years.”

Dad gave her a disapproving stare.

Lisa chimed in, her plate already empty. “Tick, how can you *not* know who it is? Didn’t you have to give them your address?”

“We told you not to do that unless we checked it out first,” Dad said, his brow creased in concern. “You know what the world’s like these days. Is this from someone we’ve already approved?”

Tick suddenly lost every ounce of his appetite. “I don’t know, Dad—yeah, I think so. It didn’t say much. It was kind of dumb, actually.” He wanted to tell them the truth, but something about the letter made him nervous, and he bit his tongue instead.

He forced the rest of his pancake down, anxiously waiting to see where the conversation went. For several moments the only sounds were the soft clanks of silverware against plates, drinks being put back on the table, Kayla babbling about her favorite cartoon. Finally, his dad mentioned the big game between the Huskies and the Trojans, opening up the morning paper to read about it.

Relief washed through Tick. When he stood to take his dishes to the sink, his mom put her hand on his arm.

“Would you mind taking Kayla out to play in the snow? She’s been asking for it all morning.”

“Uh . . . sure,” Tick replied, smiling at his sister even though his thoughts were a million miles away. “Come on, kid.”

~

Late that night, after watching the movie Dad had brought home—a creepy sci-fi flick where the hero had to travel between dimensions to fight different versions of the same monster—Tick lay on his bed, alone, reading the letter once again. Night had fallen hours earlier and the darkness seemed to creep through the frosted window, devouring the faint light coming from his small bedside lamp. Everything lay in shadow, and Tick’s mind ran wild imagining all the spooky things that could be hiding in the darkness.

Why are you even doing this? he asked himself. *This whole thing has to be a joke.*

But he couldn’t stop himself. He read through the words for the hundredth time. The same ones jumped out at him without fail.

Dreadful time of need.

Indubitably and despicably deadly.
Very frightening things are coming.
Lives are at stake.
Courage to choose the difficult path.
Who would send him such a—

A noise from the other side of the room cut him out of his thoughts. He leaned on his elbow to look, a quick shiver running down his spine. It had sounded like the clank of metal against wood, followed by a quick burst of *whirring*—almost like the hum of a computer fan, but sharper, stronger—and it had only lasted a second or two before stopping.

What in the world . . .

He stared at the dark shadow that arrowed across the floor between his dresser and the closet. He reached for his lamp to point it at the spot, but froze when he heard the noise again—the same mechanical whirr, but this time followed by a series of soft thumps that pattered along the carpet toward him. He looked down from the lamp too late to see anything. Tick froze. It sounded like a small animal had just run across the room and under his bed.

Tick pulled his legs to his body with both arms, holding himself in a ball, squeezing. *What was it? A squirrel? A rat? What had that weird sound been?*

He closed his eyes, knowing he was acting like the biggest baby on the planet but not caring. Every kid's nightmare had just come true for him. Some . . . *thing* was under his bed. Probably something hideous. Something crouching, ready to spring at him as soon as he got the nerve to peek.

He waited, scared to open his eyes. Straining his ears, he heard nothing. A minute went by, then two. He hoped an ounce of courage would magically well up inside him from somewhere, but no such luck. He was thoroughly and completely creeped out.

A sudden image from an old movie popped in his head: a horrible, monstrous gremlin eating through the bottom of his bed, straight through to the mattress, biting and chewing and snarling. It was all Tick needed.

Moving faster than he'd thought possible, Tick jumped off the bed and sprinted for the door, ripping it open even as he heard the sound of small feet scampering across the carpet behind him. He bolted out of his room and quickly closed the door.

Something slammed into it from the other side with a loud clunk.

Edgar the Brave

Five minutes later, Tick's dad stood next to him in front of the closed door to his room, robed and slippers, flashlight in hand. "Are you sure?" he asked, his voice still deep and rough from having woken up. "Did you see it?"

"No, but I heard it loud and clear." Tick shuddered at the memory.

"Was it a rat?"

"I don't know. It . . . It sounded like a machine or something." Tick winced, sure his dad would finally send him to an insane asylum—first his bizarre behavior at breakfast that morning, now this.

"A *machine*? Tick, what book were you reading before you went to bed? Stephen King or something?"

"No."

"Was it the movie we watched?"

"No, Dad. I promise I didn't imagine it. The thing had to have been huge—more like a . . . a dog or something." Tick felt stupid and resolved to quit babbling.

"Well, I guess opening the door is all there is to it, then."

Tick looked up at his dad, whose face wore a scared, tense expression, and felt oddly relieved that his old man was just as spooked as he was. "Let's do it, Dad."

Dad smiled, flicking on the flashlight. The hallway light was on as well, but Tick thought you could never have too much light when searching for mechanical demons that ate through the bottom of beds before gobbling up the child who slept on it.

Several seconds passed, the two of them staring down at the brass doorknob.

"Well?" Tick asked.

"Oh . . . yeah." Somewhat sheepish, Dad reached forward and twisted the handle, pushed, then pulled his hand back like he expected a troll to jump out and bite it off.

As the door swung open with a long, groaning creak that echoed through the house, a wave of light from the hallway spread over the carpet like a rising tide. Tick tensed, sure the strange something would dart at them the second it had a chance, scuttling across the floor like a possessed badger. But he saw nothing unusual.

Dad reached around the edge of the doorframe and turned on the bedroom light. In an instant, every last shadow in the room disappeared, bringing a completely different feel to everything.

Tick felt his fear go down a notch. Just a notch. “Maybe it went under the bed again.”

Letting out a big sigh, Dad walked over and knelt down next to the bed, where a heavy quilt draped nearly to the floor, hiding the space underneath. “Listen, Tick, I’m not gonna lie to you—you’ve got me just as freaked out as you.”

“Really?”

“Let’s just say if something runs out at me, I’m going to scream like a little girl and run to your mom.”

Tick laughed. “Me, too.”

Dad quickly pulled up the quilt and beamed the flashlight under the bed, sweeping it back and forth like a sword of sunshine. Nothing but a few random books scattered across the dusty carpet. “Not under there,” he said with relief. He leaned against the bed to push himself to his feet—no small effort for a man the size of Edgar Higginbottom.

“The closet?” Tick said, licking his dry lips.

“Yeah, the closet. Where every monster that’s ever eaten a child dwells. Just great.”

They edged across the room, which now seemed as wide as the Sahara Desert. Tick noticed his dad tiptoeing, which for some reason made him laugh, though it came out sounding like a panicked hyena cornered by three starving lions.

“What?” Dad asked, settling back down onto his heels.

“Nothing. Go for it.” Tick gestured to the closet door, which stood ajar a couple of inches.

Dad reached out and flung it open, then took a quick step back. Nothing moved in the cluttered pile of dirty clothes, sports balls, Frisbees, and other junk. There didn’t seem to be enough space for a mechanical dog-sized monster to hide.

Tick stepped forward and nudged a pile of clothes with his foot. No response. They spent the next ten minutes searching the room from top to bottom, their initial fear having almost completely melted away, but found nothing.

“It has to be here somewhere, Dad. I’m telling you, there’s no way I imagined that thing. It scared me half to death.”

“Don’t worry, son, I believe you. But sometimes we wake from dreams and they seem very . . . *real*. You know?”

Tick wanted to argue, but he was smart enough to consider the possibility, even though it kind of made him want to kick his dad in the shins for suggesting it. Tick *had* been on the bed for a long time—maybe he'd fallen asleep without realizing it. But then the thing that clunked against the door . . . ?

No, he was convinced it'd been real. But why worry his poor dad any longer? He nodded. "Yeah, maybe."

"Come on," Dad said, flicking off the flashlight and putting his arm around Tick's shoulders. "You can sleep on the little couch in our bedroom. It'll be like old times when the branch outside your window used to give you the heebie-jeebies on a windy night. It's been years since we've had a sleepover."

Tick felt dumb and embarrassed, but he didn't hesitate, grabbing his pillow and blanket before following his dad out of the room. In the hallway, they shared a glance, then Dad shut Tick's bedroom door, pulling on the knob until they both heard the comforting click of the latch taking hold.

A Most Unwelcome Patch of Smoke

The next Saturday afternoon, still in the bliss of Thanksgiving vacation and full from leftover turkey sandwiches, Tick sat in the front room, staring out the window at the falling snow. His family lived in a heavily wooded area and the east side of the state of Washington made for lots of snow in the wintertime. Many people in town grumbled about it, but Tick never did.

He loved the cold, he loved the snow, and he loved what came with it—Thanksgiving, then Christmas vacation, then the football play-offs, then the annual Jackson County Chess Tournament—where he'd won his age bracket three straight years. But even more than any of that, Tick loved the look of the cold white powder resting in soft clumps on the dozens of evergreen trees outside his house.

He heard a rumble coming down the street and saw the mailman's truck slugging through the thick snow with chained tires. Tick watched as it pulled up to their mailbox; he saw the mailman reach out and put a stack of letters inside. A flash of yellow in the bunch made Tick's heart jump-start to super speed. He leaned forward for a better view but it was too late. The truck lumbered away, sending twin sprays of snow shooting out behind the tires.

Tick jumped up from the couch and ran to the front door where he quickly put on his coat and snow boots. The rest of his family seemed busy with their own thing so no one noticed his nervous reaction to seeing the golden piece of mail.

It had been a full week since receiving the letter from Alaska, and he'd thought seriously of burning it every single day. He knew the weird thing in his closet had to be related to the "very frightening things" he'd been warned about. It seemed so simple to throw the letter into the fire to make sure nothing else happened.

But the part of Tick that loved chess and brainteasers and science desperately wanted to see what the "Twelve Clues" were all about, so he hadn't burned the letter and the week had dragged on worse than the one right before Christmas.

And now, it looked like his choice *not* to burn the letter may have paid off.

He trudged his way through the few inches of snow to the mailbox. His dad had cleared everything with the blower earlier that morning, grumbling about how early winter had set in this year, but now Tick could barely tell

he'd done anything at all. The storm was one of those that just kept on coming. The world lay bathed in white, a wintry wonderland that Tick knew would put even the scrogiest Scrooge in the holiday spirit.

He reached the brick mailbox and opened it up, pulling out the stack left moments earlier. He shuffled through the stack, taking each piece off the top and placing it on the bottom—a JC Penny catalog; power bill; an early Christmas card from Aunt Liz; junk mail; junk mail; junk mail.

And then there it was, the envelope, crinkled and golden, with Tick's name and address written messily in blue ink across the front; no return address; the stamp an exotic temple perched high on a mountain. As promised, his next message had arrived.

And this time it was postmarked from Kitami, Japan.

~

Tick couldn't believe his luck—no one had to know about this second letter. Something inside of him still itched to tell his parents, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. Not until he knew more, *understood* more. Not until he'd figured out the puzzle. With a crazy mix of excitement and panic, he locked the door to his room and sat on the bed, the yellow envelope in his sweaty hands.

He paused, considering the creepy thing from his closet one last time. He could still stop, burn both letters, and never look back.

Yeah, right.

Tick tore open the letter. He pulled out a single piece of the same white cardstock that had been used the first time, though this time it was only about half the size of the first one. As before, one side was blank while the other contained a typed message:

Mark your calendar. One week from the day before the day after the yesterday that comes three weeks before six months from six weeks from now minus forty-nine days plus five tomorrows and a next week, it will happen. A day that could very well change the course of your life as you know it.

I must say, I hope to see you there.

Scribbled directly below the last line were the initials "M.G." and a note that said "This is clue 1 of 12."

Tick sat back against the wall, his head swimming in confusion and awe.

He no longer doubted the messages represented a very serious matter—clues to something extremely important. He was sure the phrase in the first letter that said many lives were at stake wasn't a joke and it scared him. No

matter the source, Tick knew he had to get to the bottom of it.

And he felt an overwhelming itch to figure out the first clue. He looked over at his calendar and started running through the words of the message, trying to mentally pinpoint the special day it referred to, but his mind kept spinning in too many directions for him to think straight. *Let's see . . . one week from today . . . six weeks before . . . six months . . . minus forty-nine days . . . ARGH!*

Shaking his head, Tick grabbed the first letter from M.G., folded it up with the second, then stuffed them both into the back pocket of his jeans and ran downstairs. It was time to get serious. First things first.

"Mom, I'm running over to the library!" he yelled as he quickly put on his coat and gloves. He was out the door before she could respond.

~

By the time Tick left his neighborhood, the snow had let up, the air around him brightening as the sun fought its way through the thinning clouds.

Deer Park was a small town and since the city center was only a couple of miles from Tick's house, he walked there all the time. And, being a bookworm and study bug, the library often ended up as Tick's destination of choice. Especially when he wanted to use the Internet. His family had it at home, but it wasn't as fast as at the library, and Kayla always seemed to want to play her Winnie the Pooh game the second he sat down at the computer, bugging him until he gave in.

He crossed over the town square where, during the summer, a huge fountain usually sprayed. Now the square lay as a flat expanse of whiteness, countless footsteps in the snow crisscrossing it as people bustled around the town.

The library was one of the oldest buildings around, a gray bundle of granite built decades ago. To get there, Tick always took a shortcut between the fire station and the drugstore, a thin alley the width of his shoulders. The stone walls that towered over him as he walked along the alley made him think of old medieval castles.

He had almost reached the end of the alley when a quick breeze whipped past his left ear, followed by an eerie, haunting moan that rose up behind him like the last call of a lonely ghost before heading back to its grave. Tick spun around, stumbling backward when he saw what was there.

A swirling, rippling cloud of gray smoke floated in the alley, surging and receding, billowing out then shrinking back again every two or three seconds. Like it was . . . *breathing*.

And then the smoke turned into a face.

The wispy smoke coalesced and hardened, forming into unmistakable

facial features. Dark eyes under bushy gray eyebrows. A crooked nose with black, gaping holes for nostrils. Thin lips pulled back into a wicked grin, exposing an abyss of a mouth with no teeth. Wild, unkempt hair and beard.

Tick willed himself to move, but he could only stare in amazement at the impossible thing floating in front of him.

The moaning sound returned—a deep, low groan filled with grief and pain. It came from every direction, amplified by the narrow stone walls, growing louder and creepier. Tick felt goose bumps break out all over him, chills washing across his skin in waves.

“What . . . who are you?” he asked, amazed that he had found the courage to speak.

Instead of answering, the smoky face groaned louder, its eyes flaring wider.

Then it lunged toward Tick, who turned and ran for his life.

The Lady in the Trees

Tick shot out of the alley at a full run and slammed into a man walking past, both of them tumbling to the ground in a chaotic jumble of arms and legs.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” Tick yelled, helping the man to his feet as he looked back at the alley, expecting the smoky apparition to appear. But nothing came out and the creepy sound had stopped completely.

“It’s okay,” the man replied as he brushed himself off. “What’s the rush?”

Tick finally focused on the man he’d tackled and saw it was Mr. Wilkinson, the school custodian. “Oh, just going to the library. Sorry.” Tick took three hesitant steps so he could see clearly down the alley. It was empty, no sign of a spooky ghost-face anywhere. “Well, gotta run. Don’t want to waste any study time!”

Not waiting for an answer, Tick took off for the old library building, wondering if somehow Mr. Wilkinson had saved him from a terrible fate.

~

Five minutes later, Tick stood doubled over in the lobby of the library, hands on his knees, gasping like each breath might be his last. Even though the thing in the alley had disappeared and not chased him, Tick had run as hard as he could until he was safe inside the musty-smelling entryway of the old building.

Maybe I am imagining things, he thought. There’s no way I just saw what I think I saw.

The librarian behind the desk gave him an evil stare as Tick caught his breath. If he’d been in a better mood he would’ve laughed at how she fulfilled every cliché in the book: hair up in a bun; glasses perched on the tip of her nose with a linked chain drooped around her neck; beady eyes that told small children they’d never reach adulthood if they didn’t read thirty books a day. This librarian must be new; the rest of the staff knew him like a mother knew her own kids.

He spotted Ms. Sears over by the non-fiction section and quickly walked toward the computers, trying to avoid her; the last thing he needed right now was some nice chitchat about the weather.

She saw him anyway.

“Hi there, Tick,” she called out to him, her beaming smile managing to calm his nerves a bit. Ms. Sears had gray, tightly curled hair that looked like a cleaning pad permanently glued atop her freckled head. “What are you up to today? Here to study up on your chess strategy? Or maybe look for a pen pal?”

Tick shook his head, trying to dislodge the heavy feeling that clung to his bones like an oily sludge. “Nah, I just wanted to poke around on the Internet. Got a little boring over at my house.”

“Your dad didn’t break out the karaoke set again, did he? If so, I hope all your windows were closed.” She gave him a wink.

“No, I think he finally figured out he sounds like a wounded goat when he sings.” He knew his voice sounded tight and he hoped Ms. Sears didn’t notice. So many questions bounced around inside his head he felt like he’d need surgery to relieve the swelling.

“Oh, Tick, you better hope I don’t tell your father you just said that,” she replied. “By the way, I hear you’re no match for him in that silly football video game.”

Tick forced a laugh. “How in the world did you know that?”

“Small town, kiddo. Small town.”

“Yeah . . . guess so.” An awkward silence followed, and he shrugged his shoulders. “Well, I better get to a computer.”

“Have fun. Let me know if you need any help.” She turned and pushed her book cart down another aisle.

Relieved, Tick jogged to the long row of computer desks and found an empty one, glad to sit down and rest. As he pulled out his library card, he nervously glanced around, though he had no idea what he was looking for. *Getting a little paranoid, aren’t you?* he chided himself. *There has to be a perfectly reasonable explanation for all of this. Something.*

He slid the card into the electronic reader, then typed his password when the prompt appeared on the screen. A few seconds later a window opened for him, connecting him to the Internet. Peeking around the library stacks like a top-level CIA agent searching for spies, Tick pulled out the two mystery letters and unfolded them, pressing them flat on the desk next to the keyboard.

He read through them both again, even though he already knew the first thing he wanted to try on the Internet search engine. He hoped other people had received similar letters and were talking about them in blogs or message boards. Holding his breath, wishing like crazy he’d find something useful, Tick typed “M.G.” and clicked SEARCH. An instant later, the computer screen told him how many hits: 2,333,117.

Great.

Web sites about MG Cars, Madagascar, Magnesium, MG Financial Group

were listed, but nothing that gave any kind of hint about who had sent the two letters. He tried other phrases: “frightening things”; “despicably deadly”; “forty-nine days plus five tomorrows.”

Nothing useful popped up.

Discouraged, he sat back and stared at the screen. He’d been afraid to admit how much he really wanted there to be others like him. He didn’t want to be alone in this crazy stuff. The first letter had been addressed to “Dear Master Atticus,” but the wording of the message made Tick think more than one letter had been sent out, a plea for help from anyone willing to give it.

Well, maybe he’d have to be the first one to put some clues out there for other people to find.

Rejuvenated by the thought, he typed in the address for the Pen Pal site, then logged into his own section and personal profile. He briefly described the situation, listed some of the key phrases from both letters, then asked if anyone out there had received something similar. He clicked SUBMIT and sat back in the chair again, folding his arms. Hopefully, if anyone else in the world searched for the same things as he’d just done, they would somehow get linked up with his Pen Pal information and e-mail him.

It was a start.

~

The snow had started up again, big fluffy flakes swirling in the wind. Tick pulled his red-and-black scarf up around his ears and mouth as he left the library and headed for home. He walked in the opposite direction from where he’d come earlier, perfectly willing to take the long way around in order to avoid the haunted alleyway. He shivered, not sure if it was from the cold weather or the memory of the spooky smoke-ghost.

He walked all the way around the downtown area, doing his best to stay in the most public of places. The sky had melted into a dull gray, flakes of white dancing around him like a shaken snow globe. *Maybe that’s where I am*, he thought. *I’ve been sucked from the real world and placed in some alien’s giant coffee table knickknack.*

A shot of relief splashed through his nerves when he finally made it to the small section of forest that lined the road to his neighborhood. All he wanted was to go home and warm up, maybe play his dad in Football 3000 . . .

From the corner of his eye, Tick saw something move in the trees just to the left of the road. Something huge, like a moose or a bear. He turned and looked more intently, curious. Though he lived in a small town, big animals rarely ventured into the woods this close to his neighborhood. Just a few feet away from him, a shadow loomed behind a thick tree frosted with snow, its owner obviously trying to hide from him. *Animals don’t hide*, Tick thought,

warning alarms clanging in his mind as he readied himself to run.

But then the thing stepped out from behind the tree and Tick's feet froze to the ground.

Despite its enormous size and odd appearance, it wasn't an "it" at all.

It was a person. A lady.

And she was eight feet tall.

Mothball

The sight of a giant, skinny woman coming out of the forest didn't help Tick's anxiety much after his experiences with the freaky thing in his bedroom and the ghost-face in the alley. He yelped and started to run down the street toward his home, only making it two steps before he tripped over a chunk of ice that had fallen off the back of someone's tire well. His face slammed into the fresh snow, which was, to his relief, powdery and soft.

By the time he scrambled up from the ground, the enormous woman was beside him, helping him to his feet instead of ripping out his throat. Her face fell into a frown, as though saddened to see him so afraid. Her expression somehow made Tick feel guilty for running away so quickly.

"Ello," she said, her voice husky and thick with a strange accent. "Pardon me looks. Been a bit of tough journey, it has." She stepped back, towering over Tick. Her eyes were anxious and hesitant and the way she fiddled with her huge hands made him think of Kayla when she was nervous. The gesture made the giant lady seem so . . . *innocent*, and Tick relaxed, feeling oddly at ease.

She had thick black hair that cascaded across her shoulders like a shawl, her face square and homely with bright blue eyes. Her gray clothes were wet and worn, hanging on her impossibly thin body like droopy sheets on a wooden laundry rack. The poor woman looked miserable in the cold, and the slight hunch to her shoulders only added to the effect. But then she swept away that impression with a huge smile, revealing an enormous set of yellow teeth.

Tick knew he was staring, but he couldn't look away. "You're . . . huge," he said before he could stop himself.

The woman flinched, her smile faltering just a bit. "I'm a bit lanky, I'll admit it," she said. "No reason for the little man to poke fun, now is it?"

"No . . . I didn't mean it that way," he stammered. "It's just . . . you're so *tall*."

"Yeah, methinks we established that."

"And . . ."

"Lanky. Come to an understanding now, have we?" She pointed down at him. "The little man is short and ugly. Mothball is tall and lanky."

Tick wasn't sure he'd heard her right. "Mothball?"

The woman shrugged her bony shoulders. “It’s me name. A bit unfortunate, I’ll admit it. Me dad didn’t have much time to think when I popped out me mum’s belly, what with all the nasty Buggaboo soldiers tryin’ to break in and all. Fared better than me twin sis, I did. Like to see you go through life with a name like Toejam.”

Tick had the strangest urge to laugh. There was something incredibly likable about this giant of a person. “Bugga-*what* soldiers? Where are you from?”

“Born in the Fifth, I was, but lived in the Eleventh for a season. Ruddy rotten time that turned out to be. Nothin’ but midgets stepping on me toes and punching me knees. Not fun, I can promise ya that. At least I met me friend Rutger there.”

Every word that flew out of the woman’s mouth only confused Tick even more. As hard as it was to believe the sheer size of the lady standing in front of him, the conversation was just as bizarre.

“The Fifth?” he asked. “What’s that, an address? Where is it? Where’s the Eleventh?”

Mothball put her gigantic hands on her hips. “By my count, you’ve done asked me several questions in a row, little man, and none time to answer them. Me brain may be bigger than yers, but you’re workin’ it a bit much, don’t ya think?”

“Okay, then,” Tick said. “Just answer one.”

“Ain’t it in the Prime where they say ‘Patience is a virtue’? Looks like you missed out on that bit of clever advice.”

Tick laughed despite the craziness of it all. “Mothball, I’m more confused every time you speak. How about you just tell me whatever you want, and I’ll shut up and listen.” He rubbed his neck, which hurt from looking up at her so much. His scarf was crusted in snow.

“Now that’s more like it, though I must admit I don’t know what to say now.” Mothball folded her arms, her face scrunching up into a serious frown as she stared down at Tick. “No harm in tellin’ that you’re from the Prime, I reckon, and that I’m from the Fifth, and me friend Rutger’s from the Eleventh I told you about just now. Wee little gent, old Rutger—looks a little like a ball of bread dough, he does. The poor bloke is short as a field swine and twice as fat. You’ll be meetin’ him, too, ya know, right directly if he’s about his business.”

“Wait,” Tick said, forgetting his promise to be quiet, at which Mothball rolled her eyes. “You sound like you know who I am. This is somehow related to the letters I got in the mail, isn’t it?”

“What else, little man? Did ya ever see an eight-foot woman *before* you got the notes from the Master?”

“Mast—” Tick paused, his mind churning like the snowflakes that swirled around his body. This giant woman had obviously come to talk to him specifically, for a purpose, and yet he’d learned nothing. “Look, Mothball, maybe you could explain everything, from the beginning?”

She shook her head vigorously. “Can’t do that, little man. Can’t do that at’ all.”

“Then why did you come here? Why did you step out of the woods to talk to me?”

“To rub ya a little, give ya a bit of confidence, ya know. Me boss sent me. Sendin’ me all over the place, he is, just to help where I can.”

“Help with what?”

“Not sure to be quite frank. I know I can’t talk about the messages, and I can’t tell you anything about the Master or the Barrier Wand or the Realities or the Kyooopy or the Chi’karda or anythin’ else to do with ’em.” She held out a finger as she said each of the strange items as though she’d been given a list beforehand. “Other than that, feel free to ask your questions, since I have no idea anymore what to talk to ya about.”

Tick rubbed his eyes, frustrated. He tried his best to memorize each of the odd words Mothball had said, burning them into his mind for later analysis. “Miss Mothball, it’s official. This is the craziest conversation I’ve ever had.”

“Sorry, little man. Truly I am.” She kicked the snow at her feet, making a huge divot. “’Simportant you figure things out for yourself. It won’t work otherwise. But, er, maybe you’ve seen something, er, *strange* since you got those letters?”

Tick’s interest perked up considerably. “Yeah, I have. Just a couple of hours ago I saw this smoky, wispy thing that formed into a face and made a freaky sound. Can you tell me about that?”

Mothball’s face lit up despite the scary subject matter of his question. “Ah! Tingle Wraiths! That’s what you’ve seen, I’d bet me left shoe. Scary fellas, them. Now *that* I can talk about.”

“You know what they are? Where they come from?”

“I ruddy well should! They almost killed me friend Rutger just last winter. ’Ere, did you get a little tingle down your spine when the Death Siren started? Ya know that’s where they get the name from.” She paused. “Ya know, *tingle*. Down your spine. Tingle Wraith. Get it?”

“Yeah . . . I get it.” If she noticed his sarcasm, she didn’t show it. “But what are they?”

“That awful sound you ’eard is the Death Siren and it only gets louder and louder, I’m afraid. They can’t move more than a few feet or so once their face is formed, but there’s no need as long as you can hear that terrible cry of theirs. Thirty seconds, once it starts—that’s all you’ve got.”

“What do you mean?”

Mothball’s brow furrowed as she wagged a finger at him. “If any man, woman, or child hears the Death Siren for thirty seconds straight, their brain turns right to mush. Nasty death, that. Seen it happen to an old bloke once. His body flopped around like a chicken with its ruddy noggin lopped off. The poor wife finally let ’im out of ’is misery. Bludgeoned him over the head with a teapot, she did.”

“You’re serious?”

“Do I look like the kind of person who’d make funnies about an old woman knocking ’er own sweet husband over the head with a teapot?”

“Well . . . no, I guess.”

“Sad, it was.” She stared at an empty spot past Tick’s shoulder for a few seconds, then looked him in the eyes. “You’ll be all right. S’long as you can run, they’ll never catch you. Just avoid ’em if you can.”

“Don’t worry, I will.”

A long pause followed, and Tick began to panic that Mothball would leave without telling him anything else. “So . . . what do I do? What are the messages *for*? Who is M.G.? What’s supposed to happen on the day he talked about in the first clue?” The questions poured out, even though he knew what her answer would be before she said it.

“Sorry, can’t speak about it. Master’s orders.”

Tick wanted to scream. “Well, then I guess there’s not much more for us to talk about, is there?”

“Not much, you thought right there, little man.”

Tick shivered, staring absently at the world of white surrounding them. “O . . . kay. So, what do we do now?”

“Best be on me way, then.” Mothball bowed her head, as if she felt just as awkward as he did. A few seconds later she snapped her fingers and looked up. “Ah, me brain must’ve shut off there for a moment. I forgot something.” She pulled out a small writing pad and a pencil from her pocket. “What’s yer name—if you don’t mind me asking?”

Her question surprised Tick. “You don’t know? How did you find me if—”

“Just be needin’ to verify, I do.” She held her pencil at the ready, waiting for his answer.

“Atticus Higginbottom. But everyone calls me Tick.”

She scanned the pad with the tip of her pencil. “Ah, there you are.” She wrote a big checkmark where the pencil had stopped, then reached into a different pocket and pulled out a crumpled yellow envelope. She held it out for Tick. “’Ere ya go, little man. Congrats to ya on makin’ a very wise and brave choice not to burn the Master’s first letter. Now this should keep you

occupied for a spell.”

Nothing was written on the front of the envelope, but Tick took it, knowing it had to be the second clue. He didn't know why he felt so surprised. M.G. never said *all* the messages would come through the mail. But it did seem odd to receive two on the same day. Maybe M.G. was sending another kind of message altogether: *Never assume anything, expect the unexpected.*

He folded the envelope and put it in his pocket, anxious to go home and read it. “Thanks. I guess I won't bother asking you any questions about it.”

“Shapin' up right nicely, you are.” Mothball smiled. “Very well, until next time, then. Best of luck to you and yours and all that.”

Tick felt an overwhelming feeling that if she left, he'd never understand anything that was going on. He desperately wanted her to stay, to talk, to help. But having just met her, he didn't know what to do or say. “You really have to go?” he asked, like a small child begging Grandma to stay just a little while longer.

Mothball's face softened into the nicest, kindest expression Tick had ever seen. “'Fraid so, little man. Got others to visit, ya know. Quite weary on me legs, it is, but not much choice in the matter. You'll do well—me bones tell me as much.”

“Will I ever see you again?”

“I hopes ya do, Master Tick. I certainly hopes ya do.”

And with that, the tall woman turned and walked back into the thick copse of trees, her large shoulders sending an avalanche of snow off the limbs where she brushed them.

Tick stared for awhile, half-expecting to see a magic poof of smoke or the fiery blastoff of an alien spaceship, but nothing happened. Mothball had simply vanished into the trees.

His life had turned completely crazy and for some reason it made him more excited than he'd felt in a very long time.

He set off for home with a smile on his face.

~

Mothball waited until the boy went around a bend in the snow-covered road before she stepped out from behind the thick tree where she'd been hiding. She shook her head, bewildered by the exuberance and innocence of youth. He was a fine one, this Atticus Higginbottom, and though she knew she wasn't supposed to do it, she'd settled on the one she'd be rooting for in this whole mess.

She walked the half-mile to the designated spot that lay deeper in the forest. No one in these parts probably remembered that this place had once been a burial ground, its wooden grave markers long since decayed and

crumbled to dust.

Poor deadies, she thought. *No one comin' to pay respects and such.*

She triggered the nanolocator signal for Master George, then waited for her boss to work his navigation skills. Funny little man, he was. A *good* man, really. As nervous as a midge bug caught in a toad paddy, but a kind and gentle soul when you dug down deep. Why, he'd saved her life, he did, and she owed him for it.

Several long moments passed. Mothball fidgeted back and forth on her feet, wondering if the restless man had messed up a thingamajig or whatchamacallit on the Barrier Wand. He was a very *precise* old chap, and usually responded in a matter of seconds, especially when expecting the nanolocator signal, as he should be now. Mothball had been right on schedule.

A small deer bounced along nearby, leaving delicate little footprints in the thick layer of snow. To Mothball's delight, it stopped to examine the unusually tall visitor. She was so used to scaring creatures away, it felt nice for a change to see something not turn and take flight.

"Watch out for the little man, won't you?" she said, glad no one was around to see her talking to a deer. "Tough times ahead, he's got. Could use a friend like you."

The animal didn't respond, and Mothball laughed.

A few seconds later, she felt the familiar tickle at the back of her neck. As she *winked* away from the forest, vanishing in an instant, she couldn't help but wonder what the deer would think of such a sight.

A Very Important Date

Tick tore open the envelope from Mothball the second he'd left the odd woman's line of vision. He had to pull his gloves off to do it, and the cold bit into them with tiny frozen pinpricks. With no surprise, he pulled out a single piece of cardstock that looked exactly like the others. His fingers growing stiff in the frigid air, he read the single paragraph.

At the appropriate time, you must say the magic words with your eyes closed. If you can't speak and close your eyes at the same time, you belong in a hospital. As for what the magic words are, I can't tell you and I never will. Examine the first letter carefully and you will work them out.

He read it again three times, then stuffed the letter and the envelope into his coat pocket. Shivering as he put his gloves back on, he couldn't help but feel a mixture of excitement and wariness.

Magic words? Eyes closed? What is this, Oz?

Things were getting just plain weird. Pulling his scarf tighter, Tick rubbed his arms, trudging through the snow toward home.

~

He got to his house just in time for dinner, which he wolfed down like a kid determined to eat all the Halloween candy before a sibling stole it. He barely heard the conversation around the table and excused himself after stuffing the last three bites' worth of spaghetti into his mouth all at once.

He leapt up the stairs to his room, determined to finally put some major thought into figuring out the clues. Something about seeing an eight-foot-tall woman appear out of the woods on a snowy day made everything seem *real*. Though he had no idea about the whys or hows or whats, he was now committed to the game.

Tick unfolded the original letter and both clues and put them on his desk, pointing his lamp to shine directly on their stark black words. He reread the first letter from M.G., which seemed to be mostly an introduction to set things up. The most recent message said the first letter would reveal "magic words" he'd need to say on a special day, but he'd get to that later. One thing at a time.

The first clue obviously told him the date of that special day—the day when he'd have to have solved the ultimate puzzle spelled out by the coming clues. He focused on the paragraph, reading it several times.

Mark your calendar. One week from the day before the day after the yesterday that comes three weeks before six months from six weeks from now minus forty-nine days plus five tomorrows and a next week, it will happen. A day that could very well change the course of your life as you know it.

I must say, I hope to see you there.

As he read through it, he tried to visualize in his mind the stated time periods, adding and subtracting as he went. But by the time he got to the end, the words always jumbled up and fell apart inside his thoughts. He realized he needed to treat it like a math problem, solving it in sections until everything could be added together.

He pulled out a pencil and drew parentheses around phrases that were easy to identify as a stand-alone period of time. Then he assigned letters to them to help him solve them in the most logical order. All the while, he knew he must be the biggest dork this side of the Pacific Ocean, but he didn't care. He was just starting to have fun.

He first attempted to figure out the clue from beginning to end, adding and subtracting time with each new phrase as it came in order. But he kept hitting a snag because of the words “before” and “six weeks from now” in the middle of the paragraph. The phrases seemed to split the timeline into two pieces and he realized he needed to work around them, not from first word to last word.

After a half hour and lots of erasing and starting over, he copied the phrases and their assigned letters to a different sheet of paper. Then, using the Seattle Seahawks calendar that hung next to his bed (which also had a one page, year-at-a-glance section for this year and the next), he penciled in the dates as he figured them out. When he finished, he leaned back in his chair and took a look:

Beginning Date: Today, November 26.

A. -6 weeks from now = January 7

B. -6 months from A = July 7

C. -the day before the day after the yesterday that comes 3 weeks before B = 3 weeks plus 1 day before B = 22 days before B = June 15

D. -1 week from C = June 22

E. -D minus 49 days = May 4

F. -E plus 5 tomorrows and a next week = E plus 12 days = May 16

He went over his math again to make sure he'd done it right, and was just about to put the calendar away, quite satisfied with himself, when he realized he'd missed the easiest and most important part of the clue. The beginning date.

You idiot, he thought.

Whoever M.G. was, he or she would have no way of knowing when people received the cryptic letters, much less when they would test out the first clue to figure out the all-important date. Tick reread one of the lines from the first letter:

Beginning today (the fifteenth of November), I am sending out a sequence of special messages . . .

November the fifteenth. Even before officially starting the messages, M.G. had provided the mystery's first hint: the start date needed to solve Clue Number One.

Tick quickly went through the calendar again, calculating three times what the date should be based on the new starting date, erasing and rewriting. Finally, confident that he'd solved it, his paper showed a different result:

May 6

At first, he worried that the results were only *ten* days apart when the beginning dates had been off by *eleven*, but after looking at the calendar three times, he determined it had to do with June only having thirty days.

May sixth. The all-important date. Just over five months from now.

Tick wrote the date in big letters on the bottom of the first clue, then ripped out the one-page calendar and stapled it to the back of the cardstock. He examined the second clue for awhile, which really did nothing but refer him to the first letter he'd received as a code or something to figure out the "magic words." After an hour of staring at the typed message, his brain exhausted, he gave up. He folded everything up together and stuck the stack in his desk drawer.

For the rest of the evening, Tick couldn't quit thinking about the first clue. According to the stranger known as M.G., something very important was to happen on May sixth of the next year.

But what?

Much later that night, after playing Scrabble with his mom and Lisa (Tick's best word: galaxy, 34 points on a double-word score), eating two-thirds of a bag of Doritos while watching SportsCenter with his dad (swearing on his life he'd never eat another chip—a promise he knew wouldn't last past tomorrow), analyzing the clues for a while (still no luck with the magic words), then reading for an hour in bed (the latest seven-inch-thick fantasy novel he'd checked out from the library), Tick finally went to sleep.

In the middle of the night, ripping him from a dream in which he'd just received the very prestigious Best Chess Player in the World trophy, crowds chanting his name and cheering wildly, Tick heard the *sounds* again: the metallic whirring, the scraping, the patter of tiny footsteps. All coming from inside the closet, where the door was closed.

Something bumped against the door.

Tick sat up, suddenly very, very awake.

The Gnat Rat

Tick's first instinct was to run and get his dad again, the creepy chills of the night he'd first heard the noises returning in full force. But he steeled himself, resolving not to go running off like a baby again until he knew it was all for real. Whatever was moving around in his closet couldn't be very big, and it had to have a reasonable explanation. Maybe it was just a squirrel that had chewed a hole through the wall—too small for them to have noticed that night when he and his dad had searched the room.

What about the mechanical fan sound? he thought. He told himself that maybe the little squirrel had accidentally eaten his dad's electric shaver, but then realized he was probably one step away from the mental hospital talking to himself like this, and telling jokes at that. *Just go check it out*, he told himself sternly.

He reached up to his headboard, keeping his eyes riveted on the closet, and flicked on the lamp. The warm glow banished the dark shadows, illuminating fully the door with its many posters and sports banners taped haphazardly across it. Encouraged and braver with the light on, Tick swung his legs around and stood up from his bed, hoping the closet door didn't burst open when he did so. Nothing moved. The sound had completely stopped.

Maybe I just imagined it. I haven't heard it since it woke me up.

Think it all he wanted, he couldn't convince himself. A slice of fear cut through his heart, making it pound even harder, sending a pulse of heat through his veins. His hands were sweaty and his shoulders and back tingled, making him remember what Mothball had said about the smoke-ghost he'd seen in the alley. The Tingle Wraith. But its sound had been totally different, and Tick didn't really expect to see one in his closet.

No, this was something different, if anything at all.

He crept over to the door with ginger steps, staring at the thin sliver of space between the floor and the bottom of the door. If anything shot out from that crack, Tick knew he'd die of a heart attack on the spot. He stopped a couple of feet away and paused, clenching and unclenching his fists.

Just open it, you sissy.

He reached forward and twisted the handle, knowing his dad had done the exact same thing just over a week ago, remembering that there had been nothing there then.

He pulled the door open and stepped back.
Something very odd rested on top of a pile of dirty clothes.
Something Tick had never seen before in his life.

~

Edgar Higginbottom was a light sleeper, which he hated. Anything and everything woke him up. Cars outside, dogs barking, a child crying. When his kids had been babies, Edgar had woken up the instant any of them fussed. Often he'd lain there, wishing against all hope that Lorena would somehow hear and offer to take a turn checking on them or feeding them. But he always got up after a few seconds, feeling guilty for being so selfish after all his wife had gone through to bring those kids into the world in the first place.

This time, though, it had been a sudden light that snapped him awake, followed by the slight creak of someone walking in the house. He pushed himself up onto one elbow and looked at the door to his room, which stood slightly ajar. Judging from the angle of the shadows caused by the light, and the direction from which the sound had come, he guessed Tick had gotten out of bed for some reason.

What's he doing up at—Edgar looked at his clock—three in the morning?

He flopped back down onto his side, then rolled his big body onto his back, rubbing his eyes and yawning as he stared at the ceiling. Then, with a grunt, he threw off the covers and sat up on the edge of the bed, searching for his slippers with his toes.

He found them, put them on, and stood up.

~

Tick's mind seemed to split into two factions as he stared at the object. One side wanted him to run because anything that magically appeared in a closet had to be bad. The other side wanted to investigate because the thing looked completely harmless. The latter won the battle, his curiosity once again victorious over common sense.

He stepped closer and dropped to his knees, leaning forward.

It was a strange metal contraption, about a foot long, five or six inches wide, and maybe eight or nine inches tall. Its shiny gray surface had no blemishes, sparkling and clean, with round, gear-looking things attached to the side. A thin handle was attached to the top of the box and a small snout-like nose and a sinuous metallic tail were attached to either end. Along the bottom edges a series of ten evenly spaced rods poked out from the box and curved toward the floor, ending in a flat piece of metal about the size of a quarter. The first thought that popped into Tick's mind was the thing looked like a stainless steel accordion, ready to march away.

But it didn't move or make a sound.

Tick noticed some writing on the side of the box, shadowed by the light coming from the room. He shifted his position closer and squinted his eyes. It took a few seconds, but he finally made out what it said:

GNAT RAT

Manufactured by Chu Industries

What in the world . . .

Tick thought of Mr. Chu, his science teacher, but he obviously had nothing to do with this. Tick would know if his favorite instructor had his own company or was affiliated with one. It had to be a coincidence.

But . . .



His mind was blank, churning to come up with an explanation for the weird thing sitting in his closet. It had to be related to the letters from M.G., the Tingle Wraith, and Mothball, but how or why . . . ? No clue.

And what in the world is a Gnat Rat? He reached out a finger and brushed

the back of the smooth gray metal box.

The thing jumped.

Tick gasped and fell backward, even though the Gnat Rat had barely moved—an inch at most—before coming to rest again. A slight buzzing came from it like the distant sound of his mom’s oven timer from downstairs. Whatever the thing was, it had just turned on or powered up.

A mechanized clicking sound sprung up and the ten pairs of metal legs started moving back and forth, slowly marching the Gnat Rat off the pile of clothes and out of the closet, toward Tick. His eyes wide and focused on the toy-like thing coming at him, Tick stood up, unsure what to do. It seemed totally harmless, a cheap robot you could buy at any discount store.

But then he remembered it slamming into his door when he’d closed it from the hallway that night. He thought about its name: Gnat Rat. And finally, he thought about how it had somehow *disappeared* and come back, magically. All of these things led to one conclusion.

A Gnat Rat is bad.

Tick was about to bolt away when he heard a loud click like the sound of a gun being cocked. He looked in shock at the ominous toy. A small door slowly swung open on the Rat’s back side.

Then little *things* started flying out of it.

~

Light or no light, a son suffering from insomnia or not, Edgar couldn’t ignore the call of nature. He finished washing his hands in the bathroom, flicked off the light, and stepped back into his bedroom. Trying his best to be quiet so Lorena could sleep—though he probably could’ve danced around the room with cymbals on his knees and blowing on a trumpet and she would’ve remained dead to the world—Edgar walked through the room and into the hallway.

Sure enough, it was Tick’s room with a light on, and an odd mechanical hum echoed out his door and down the hall. *Did he get some new gizmo I don’t know about?*

Edgar had taken only one step forward when he heard the boy scream.

~

Tick shrieked as dozens of winged, buzzing little drones flew out of the Gnat Rat in a torrent like a pack of raving mad hornets. Without exception they came directly at him, swarming around his body before he could react, attacking, biting, *stinging*.

Tick swatted at them, slapping and hitting his own body, dancing and kicking, yelling for help. Pinpricks of pain stabbed every inch of his skin,

under his clothes, in his hair; the mechanical gnats were hungry and Tick must've looked awfully delicious. Panic shot through him in a rush of adrenaline, his mind shutting down, offering no ideas on what he should do.

He heard his bedroom door slam against the wall.

"Atticus!" his dad yelled.

But Tick couldn't look at him. He'd squeezed his eyes closed, scared the gnats would blind him. They were relentless, attacking him over and over again, their sharp stingers finding fresh spots to hurt him with a frightening ease. Overwhelmed by pain and fear, he fell to the ground.

He felt his dad gripping his arms, dragging him across the floor and out of his room. Down the hall, into the bathroom. He heard the rush of water in the bathtub.

Dad, he thought, wanting to warn him, but afraid to open his mouth. They'll eat you alive, too.

It hurt too much to cry. Tick felt like he'd been taken to an acupuncture school and the overanxious students had given up on the little needles and decided to use knives instead. His whole world had turned into one big ouch. He'd never felt so hopeless.

His dad heaved Tick off the floor and plopped him into the tub, splashing the cold water all over his pajamas, his skin, his hair. Though his whole body felt racked with pain, Tick sensed the gnats leaving him in hordes even before he'd landed in the shallow pool of water.

They're machines, he thought distantly. They run on electricity. The water would kill them.

An angry buzz filled the bathroom, but Tick couldn't bring himself to open his eyes. He heard a towel whipping through the air. His dad must be trying to chase the gnats away and out of the room. Horror filled Tick's stomach as he realized the vicious gnats might be going for his sisters, his mom.

"Dad!" he yelled with a slur, his mouth swollen. "Kayla! Lisa! Mom!"

And then he passed out.

~

"What were they?" the doctor asked. "Where did they come from?"

Edgar didn't feel like talking. Even if he did, he had no answer for the man.

They stood in a curtained-off section of the emergency room, surrounded by the sounds of medical machines beeping, the murmur of voices, the squeak of gurneys rolling along the hallway; a child cried in the distance. Everything smelled of ammonia and disinfectant. It was all extremely depressing.

Edgar stared down at his son lying on the bed, eyes closed. Every inch of

the boy's body looked red and puffy, pockmarked with hundreds of black dots. Lorena and Lisa cried in the corner, clutching little Kayla in a three-way hug. Edgar felt certain his heart had broken into two pieces and was slowly sinking to his stomach.

Tick had always been a lucky kid. Edgar liked to joke that Tick had been born clutching a rabbit's foot. When Tick had been only five years old, the family had taken a shopping trip to Spokane and Tick had darted for the middle of a busy road, already two steps past the curb before Edgar even noticed. Even as Edgar had sprinted to save his boy, he watched in utter horror as a huge truck, blaring its horn and screeching its brakes, seemingly ran right over Tick. Edgar would never forget the scream that erupted from his own throat at that moment, an alien sound that still haunted his dreams sometimes.

But when the truck passed, Tick stood there in the street, untouched, his hair not so much as ruffled. It had been nothing short of a miracle.

Then, a few years later, the family had gone to the coast for a summer trip, enjoying a rare hot and sunny day on the Washington beach. Tick, showing off his newly discovered body-surfing talent, had been swept away by a sudden and enormous wave, sucking him out to sea. The current pulled the poor boy from the soft sands directly into an area of jagged, vicious rocks nearby. Edgar and Lorena barely had time to register the shock and terror of what was happening before they saw Tick standing on a jutting shoulder of stone, waving with a huge smile on his face.

Or the time he fell off the big waterslide tower at Water World Park, only to land on a pile of slip 'n slide tubes left there by a family eating lunch.

The stories went on and on. They never talked about it; Edgar was afraid to jinx the whole thing, and he had no idea if Tick even realized anything out of the ordinary was happening. Kids rarely do—life is life, and they know nothing different until much later.

But despite all that he'd seen of Tick's narrow escapes, Edgar couldn't help but feel the panic rising in his chest. Had the boy's streak of luck finally run out? Would he survive this—

“What *happened?*” the doctor repeated.

“I don't know,” Edgar mumbled. “A bunch of bugs, or bees, or gnats, or something attacked him. I threw him in the bathtub, shooed the things away with a towel. They stayed in a tight pack, and when I opened a window, they flew right out.”

The doctor looked at Edgar, his expression full of doubt and concern, eyebrows raised. “*You* shooed them away?”

“Yes, I did.” Edgar knew the man's concern before he said it.

“But you—”

“I know, Doctor, I know.” He paused. “I didn’t get stung. Not once.”

The Temptation of the Flames

Tick could think of a million things he'd rather do than get stung all over his body by mechanical gnats that popped out of a demon lunch box with legs. It was a long list and included being dropped in a boiling vat of vinegar and having his toenails removed with hot pincers. Two days after the attack, he'd returned home from the hospital feeling and looking much better, but the experience remained vivid in his mind, playing itself out over and over again. Without any doubt, he knew the Gnat Rat and its stinging bugs had been the single worst thing that had ever happened to him. And that included the time Billy "The Goat" Cooper had almost broken Tick's arm in front of the girls' locker room.

Despite the lingering horror he felt, Tick was madly curious to know where the Gnat Rat had come from. And where it had gone. The boxy contraption must have disappeared right after releasing the bugs because his dad said he never saw it and saw no signs of a nest or a hole anywhere in the walls or floorboard. The Rat would've been impossible to miss since Tick had collapsed right next to it in his room. The thing had simply vanished—or run away to whatever magical hole it lived in. Either way, Tick knew he could never look at the world in the same way again, and the knowledge made him feel sick, fascinated, and scared, all at the same time.

The doctors had probed him over and over, not bothering to hide their suspicion that some serious child abuse had occurred. But they found dozens of stingers, just like the ones that came from a normal yellow jacket common to the area. That finding, coupled with the obvious fact that Edgar and Lorena Higginbottom were perhaps the two nicest people to ever live in Deer Park, and quite possibly the world, quickly dissolved the distrust of the doctors toward the parents.

Though they said no fewer than a hundred times how impossible it seemed that the bees targeted Tick and no one else, let alone the fact that bees rarely attacked during the middle of winter, the doctors eventually let the matter drop and sent Tick home.

I must have some seriously sweet blood, Tick thought, picking at the bandages covering his arms.

The only thing more baffling than the lone victim and the Gnat Rat disappearing was how quickly Tick healed. He almost felt disappointed he

wouldn't miss more than a couple of days of school. Almost.

Now, lying in bed, staring at the ceiling late the next Tuesday night, he couldn't sleep. More than ever before in his life, Tick felt terribly *afraid*. His life was at risk, and for what?

He'd put on a show for his family, acting brave and cracking jokes, but he knew he did it more for himself than anyone else. He didn't want to accept the horror of what he'd experienced, didn't want to accept the potential for worse things to come. But the fear crashed down on him after dinner and he'd never felt so hopeless.

Sighing, he sat up in bed and retrieved the letter and clues from his desk drawer, staring at them for a long moment. As he did, he felt the last ounce of bravery drain from his spirit. Quietly, he crept from his room and took the letters downstairs to the living room.

It was the only room in the house with a fireplace.

~

Twenty minutes later, the gas-log fire had heated the entire room, its blower wafting warm and comforting air across Tick's face as he sat directly in front of it, staring at the licking flames. The rest of his family had long since fallen asleep, and he had been extra, extra careful not to wake his freakishly light-sleeping dad. This was Tick's moment of truth and he needed to be alone.

He gripped the first letter tightly in his right hand, clenching a fist around the wrinkled cardstock. He didn't know how it worked, but he trusted the instruction told to him by the mystery-person, M.G. If ever he wanted it to stop, just burn the letter and everything would "cease and desist." Tick had no doubt it was true, just as he had no doubt that Gnat Rats, Tingle Wraiths, and an eight-foot-tall woman named Mothball really and truly existed.

Burn the letter, stop the madness.

The thought had run through his mind a thousand times since he'd first come to consciousness after the brutal gnat attack. Only two clues in—ten to go—and he wanted to quit. *Desperately* wanted to quit. How could he keep going, when things worse than the Gnat Rat might attack him? How could he, Atticus Higginbottom, a kid with a pretty decent brain but the body of a thirteen year old, fight the forces that some unknown enemy threw at him? How could he do it?

He sat up, crossing his legs under him, facing the fire. He thought about the tremendous ease of simply throwing the letter into the fire not two feet in front of him, of watching it crinkle and shrivel into a crispy ball of black flakes, of returning his life back to normal. He could do it and be done. Forever.

And then it hit him—an odd feeling that started somewhere deep down in his stomach and swelled into his chest, spreading through his fingers and toes.

The first letter said many lives were at stake. Whether that meant ten or ten thousand, Tick didn't know. Neither did he have any idea how twelve clues, written to him in cryptic messages from some stranger, had anything to do with saving people's lives. But could he really risk that? Could Tick really be a coward and throw this challenge to the flames, when so much might be on the line? When so many people's lives were on the line?

Even if it were just *one* person?

What if that one person was Kayla and her life was in the hands of someone else? The thought gripped Tick's heart, squeezed it hard. He pictured Kayla's big-toothed smile, her cute look of concentration when she played on the computer, her giggle fits when Tick tickled her under her arms. Tick's eyes rimmed with tears. The thought of anything bad happening to his little sister made him feel a sadness that was heavy and bleak.

In that moment, in the darkness of deepest night, sitting in the warmth of a flickering fire and thinking about things far beyond what any kid should have to contemplate, Tick made his decision, committing to himself that he would never waver from it, no matter what.

In that moment, he answered the question posed to him by the one known as M.G.

Will you have the courage to choose the difficult path?

"Yes," Tick whispered to the flames. "The answer is yes."

He folded up the letter and turned his back on the fire.

~

In a place very far from the home of Atticus Higginbottom, Master George awoke with a start. Exactly what had jolted him from sleep, he wasn't sure, but it didn't make him very happy. He rather liked the act of blissful slumber and believed very strongly in the old adage about beauty sleep. (Though he knew if Mothball or Rutger were around they'd say something persnickety about him needing to sleep for the next forty years to gain a single ounce of beauty.)

He looked down at his toes, poking out from his red crocheted socks like little mice searching for food. He'd pulled his blanket up too far, exposing his feet, and wondered if the chill of the night had awakened him.

No, he thought. I don't feel cold. This was something much more. Something shook me.

And then he shot up into a sitting position, any remnant of sleep completely quashed. He threw the covers off, put on his velvet slippers, and shuffled to the next room where all kinds of buzzing machinery and humming

trinkets blinked and clinked and chirped. A large computer screen took up the entire left wall. Several hundred names were listed in alphabetical order, their letters glowing green, a variety of symbols and colors to the right of each name.

One of the names had a flashing purple checkmark next to it, which made Master George gasp and sit down in his specially-ordered, magnetically adjustable, ergonomically sophisticated swivel chair. He spun in three complete circles, moving himself with the tips of his toes, almost as though he were dancing. And then he laughed. He laughed loud and long and hard, his heart bursting with pride and joy.

After many disappointments, someone had finally made a Pick, one so powerful it had shaken the very foundation of the Command Center. *The ramifications could be enormous*, he thought, giddy and still chuckling.

And then, to his utter and complete astonishment, defying every sense of rational thought in his bones, two more purple checkmarks appeared on the screen, almost at the same time.

Three? So close together? Impossible!

He stood up, rocketing the chair backward with the backs of his knees, squinting to make sure it hadn't been a trick of his eyes. There they were—three purple marks.

While dancing an old Irish jig he'd learned from his great-grandpapa, Master George went in search of his tabby cat, Muffintops. He found her snoozing behind the milk cupboard in the kitchen and yanked her into his arms, hugging her fiercely.

"Dearest Muffintops," he said, petting her. "We must celebrate right away with some peppermint tea and biscuits!" He set her down and began rummaging through his pots and pans to find a clean teapot. Once he'd set some water on the stove, he straightened and put his hands on his hips, staring down at his whiskered friend.

"My goodness gracious me," he said. "Three Picks within a few minutes of each other? I daresay we have a lot of work to do."

~

Upstairs in his room, Tick was wide awake, despite the late hour.

He studied the first letter from M.G. until the sky outside faded from black to bruised purple and the first traces of dawn cast a pallid glow outside his window. The wind had picked up, the infamous branch that used to haunt his dreams as a kid taking up its age-long duty, scraping the side of the house with its creepy claws of leafless wood. But Tick kept reading, searching, *thinking*.

The magic words.

He didn't know what they were, why he needed them, or what would happen on May sixth when he was supposed to say them, but he knew they were vital and he had to figure them out. And the first letter supposedly told him everything necessary to do just that.

Nothing came to him. He searched the sentences, the paragraphs, the words for clues. He tried rearranging letters, looked for words that were perhaps spelled vertically, sought the word "magic" to see if it lay hidden anywhere. Nothing.

He remembered the famous riddle from *Lord of the Rings* where the entrance to the Mines of Moria said "Speak friend, and enter." It had literally meant for the person to *speak* the word "friend" in the Elven language and the doors would open. But nothing like that seemed to jump out at Tick as he sought for clues.

Figuring out the date of the special day from the first clue had been a piece of cake compared to this, and he grew frustrated. He also felt the effects of staying up all night and a sudden surge of fatigue pressed his head down to the pillow, pulled his eyelids closed.

When his mom poked her head in to wake him up for school, he begged for one more day, knowing she'd have a hard time arguing with a kid who'd been eaten alive just a few days earlier.

After his mom tucked him back into bed and patted his head like a sick three year old, Tick pondered the pledge he'd made by the fireplace the night before—to keep going, to fight the fear, to solve the puzzle. No matter what.

I'm either really, really brave or really, really stupid.

Finally, despite the light of sunrise streaming through his window, he fell asleep.

Part 2
The Journal

Old and Dusty

That Friday, completely healed and caught up on the work he'd missed at school, Tick sat in his science class, trying to pay attention to Mr. Chu as he talked about the vast mysteries that still awaited discovery in the field of physics. Usually, Tick enjoyed this class more than most, but he couldn't get his mind off the second clue, frustrated that he wasn't able to crack the code of the first letter.

"Mr. Higginbottom?" Mr. Chu asked.

Tick's attention whipped back to the real world, and he stared at his teacher, suddenly panicked because he had no clue why Mr. Chu had said his name. "Sorry, what was the question?"

"I didn't ask you a question," his teacher answered, folding his arms. "I was just wondering why you're staring out the window like there's a parade out there. Am I boring you?" He raised his eyebrows.

"No, I was just . . . pondering the physics of the tetherball outside."

Several snickers broke out in the room, though Tick knew it wasn't in appreciation for his joke. Some of the kids in his class didn't even listen to what he said anymore; they automatically laughed at him whenever he spoke because they assumed the others would think they were cool for poking fun at the nerdy Stinkbottom with the Barf Scarf. The laughter didn't faze Tick in the least; in his mind, those people had ceased to exist a long time ago.

"Well," Mr. Chu said. "Maybe you'd like to come up to the board and give us a diagram of what you're thinking about?" Tick knew the man had to give him a hard time every now and then or it would be overwhelmingly obvious that he favored the smart kid with the red-and-black scarf.

"No, sir," Tick replied. "Haven't figured it out yet."

"Let me know when you do. And in the meantime, grace me with your attention."

Tick nodded and resettled himself in his seat, looking toward the front of the classroom. Someone behind him threw a wad of paper at his head; he ignored it as it ricocheted and fell to the floor. Mr. Chu continued his lecture, but faltered a few minutes later when someone grumbled about how boring science was.

"Oh, really?" Mr. Chu asked, his tone almost sarcastic. "Don't you realize all this stuff leads to things that are much, much more fascinating? We need to

build a solid foundation so you can have a lot of fun later.”

He only received blank stares in answer.

“I mean it! Here’s an example. How many of you have heard of quantum physics?”

Along with a few others, Tick raised his hand. He’d once watched a really cool show on the Discovery Channel with his dad about the subject. Both of them had agreed afterward that quantum physics must have been something *Star Trek* fans invented so they’d have another topic to discuss instead of debating the average number of times Mr. Spock visited the toilet every day.

“Who’d like to take a stab and tell us what it’s about?” Mr. Chu asked.

Trying to make up for his earlier daydreaming, Tick was the only one who offered. Mr. Chu nodded toward him.

“It’s about the really, really small stuff—stuff smaller than atoms even—and they have a lot of properties that don’t seem to follow the same rules as normal physics.”

“Wow, you’re smart, SpongeBob,” someone whispered from the back. He thought it was Billy the Goat, but couldn’t be sure. Tick ignored him.

“Such as?” Mr. Chu prodded, either not hearing the smart-aleck remark or disregarding it.

“Well, I don’t remember a whole lot of the show I saw on T.V., but the thing that really seemed cool was they’ve basically proven that something can literally be in two or more places at once.”

“Very good, Tick, that’s part of it.” Mr. Chu paced back and forth in front of the students, hands clasped behind his back, trying his best to fit the mold of Very Smart Professor. “We can’t get into it very much in this class, but I think many of you will be excited to learn about it as you study more advanced classes in high school. My favorite aspect of the Q.P., as we used to call it in my peer study groups, is the fact they’ve also proven you can affect the *location* of an object simply by observing it. In other words, how you study it changes the outcome, which means there must be more than one outcome occurring simultaneously. Does that make sense?”

Tick nodded, fascinated, wishing they could drop the easy stuff and dig deeper into this subject. He didn’t bother to look around the room, knowing that the rest of his classmates would once again return nothing but blank stares.

“Basically,” Mr. Chu continued, “it means alternate versions of the present could exist at any moment, and that your actions, your observations, your *choices* can determine which of those you see. In other words, we’re living in one of maybe a million different versions of the universe. Some people call it the multiverse.” He folded his arms and shook his head slightly while staring at the floor, a small smile on his face, as if recalling a fond memory. “Nothing

in all my studies has ever fascinated me as much as quantum physics.”

He paused, looking around the room, and his face drooped into a scowl of disappointment like a kid who’d just told his parents he’d seen a dragonfly, only to get back a “Who cares? Go wash your hands for dinner” in return.

“Uh . . . anyway, I guess that’s enough on that subject. The bell’s about to ring. Don’t forget your monthly research report is due tomorrow.”

Tick gathered his things and put them in his backpack, not worried about the assignment; his had been done since before the Gnat Rat attack.

Mr. Chu came up to him and put a hand on his shoulder. “Tick, you should think about studying quantum physics in more detail when you get a chance. It’s right up your alley. Pretty crazy world we live in, don’t you think?”

“Tell me about it,” Tick muttered. “Hey, Mr. Chu?”

“Yes?”

“Does your family . . . I mean . . . have you ever heard of a company called Chu Industries?”

Mr. Chu’s face wrinkled into a look of confusion. “No, never heard of it before. But there are a lot of Chus in the world. Why?”

“Oh . . . nothing. Just an ad I saw somewhere. Made me wonder if you had anything to do with it.”

“I wish. Sounds like it could’ve made me rich.”

“Yeah, maybe. Well, see ya tomorrow.” Tick swung his backpack over his shoulder and walked to his next class.

~

That night, Tick decided he needed a better way to organize the letters and clues he’d received from M.G. and Mothball, especially knowing that because of his decision not to burn the first letter, more and more would be coming.

He went down to the basement and rummaged through a couple of boxes labeled with his name and last year’s date. Every year or two, Lorena Higginbottom insisted on a full top-to-bottom cleaning of the entire house, and her number one rule was that if you hadn’t used something in more than a year, it needed to be thrown away or put into storage. These boxes were the result of last spring’s mine sweep through Tick’s closet.

He remembered he’d been given a journal for Christmas two or three years ago from his Grandma Mary. He’d vowed to write in it every day, chronicling the many adventures of the genius from Jackson Middle School, but the night he’d sat down to complete his first official entry, he hadn’t been able to think of one thing that sounded interesting. He had managed to write his name on the front cover before he’d put it aside, hoping Grandma Mary would never find out. She’d have been devastated if she knew what had happened to her

gift.

But he'd never forgotten how cool his name looked on the cover, and the journal would be the perfect thing for him now. Tick's life was no longer boring or uninteresting.

He found the journal lying beneath a stack of Hardy Boys books. Tick had read each of them several times before they'd made way for bigger and better novels. He pulled the journal out and stared at the cover. It had a marble-brown hardcover, its edges purposely worn and slightly burnt to make it look like the old record-book of an international explorer on the high seas. The pages inside were slightly yellowed for an aged appearance, lined from top to bottom, just waiting for him to record his thoughts and notes and scribbles.

It was perfect.

In the center of the front cover was a three-inch wide rectangle of burnt orange where he'd written his name a couple of years ago. Using the permanent black marker he'd brought downstairs with him, he added a few more words to the title. Finished, he held the journal up and took a prideful look:

Tick Higginbottom's

Journal of Curious Letters

He then took out the glue from his mom's scrapbooking case and pasted the first letter from M.G. onto the first page of the journal, centering it as best he could. He left a few blank pages for notes and calculations, then glued in the first clue, along with his solution and the ripped-out calendar with the special date of May sixth circled. Finally, he attached the second clue. He made sure everything was dry, then closed the book.

Satisfied with his efforts, and glad to have everything he needed in one portable book, he took his journal and went back upstairs.

The next day, almost as though the mysterious M.G. knew Tick was organized and ready to go, the third clue came in the mail.

The Voice of M.G.

It was Saturday, and just as he had done a couple of weeks earlier, Tick spied on the mailbox, waiting for the mailman to show up. The day was clear and crisp, the sun almost blinding as it reflected off the snow still covering the ground. Tick sipped hot chocolate and watched countless little drops of water fall from the trees in the yard as clinging icicles dripped away the last remnants of their lives. His mom and dad had gone Christmas shopping, Lisa was upstairs playing house with Kayla, and the soft melody of Bing Crosby crooning “White Christmas” echoed through the house. Tick didn’t know if life could be any better.

The truck finally rumbled up to his house around noon, and Tick didn’t bother looking to see if there was any sign of a yellow envelope. He had his boots and coat on and was out the door before the mailman had even left for the next house. By the time the truck drove off, Tick had already pulled out the stack of letters.

Sitting right on top was a crumpled yellow envelope with the same messy handwriting, postmarked from South Africa. Other than a strange lump in one corner, the rest of the envelope was flimsy and flat. Intrigued, a shiver of excitement rattling his nerves, Tick sprinted back to the house and up to his room in no time, where the *Journal of Curious Letters* lay resting on his bed.

He ripped open the envelope and peered inside, seeing nothing at first. He billowed it out, turning it upside down and shaking it until a little, flashy square fell out and tumbled off the bed. Tick picked it up off the floor. It was a tiny cassette tape, the kind his dad used when he made everyone talk about themselves for a tape to send to Grandma and Grandpa in Georgia. (A couple of years ago, his dad had finally switched to a video camera, but he still occasionally used the tape recorder, too.)

Nothing had been written on the tape label, but it didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out what M.G. intended the recipients of this clue to do. It took Tick ten minutes to dig out his dad’s little tape machine, hidden behind some socket wrenches in his dad’s infamous “junk drawer.” Tick could hardly contain himself as he went back to his room, locked the door, popped in the tape, and pushed PLAY.

He heard a few seconds of scratchy background noise, then a loud clank. Tick, pencil in hand, planned to transcribe every word into his journal, but

once the message started, he could only listen, fascinated.

A man spoke, his voice quirky and heavy with a British accent. Not like Mothball's accent; no, this man's voice sounded much more sophisticated and tight, like the head butler at an English manor who has just realized his entire staff is stricken with the flu on the night of the big Christmas party to which hundreds of very important people are invited.

Well, one mystery had been solved: M.G. was a man.

When the short message ended, Tick laughed out loud, then rewound it to listen again. Then he quickly fast forwarded through the rest of the tape to make sure there were no other messages. On the fourth time, he wrote every single word into his journal:

Say the magic words when the day arrives, then hit the ground below you ten times, as hard as you can, with a very specific object. It's a bit of a quandary because I can't tell you what the object is. Let's just say, I hope your soul is stronger than mine because there are no exceptions to this requirement. Also, the object must be the opposite of wrong but not correct.

Whew, glad to have that bit done. I really need to use the lavatory before I . . . oh, sorry, . . . meant to turn the recorder off. Where is that confounded button . . . ? Ah! There we are—

Click.

Tick hit the STOP button, shaking his head at how crazy this M.G. guy seemed. Ever since he'd mentioned peppermint sticks and sweetened milk in the first letter, Tick had sensed a subtle sense of humor in the man, a contrast to the message of doom that seemed to be laced throughout the clues and warnings. He wondered if he'd ever get to meet M.G. He'd already begun to feel a sense of trust toward him.

Tick stared at his own handwriting, rereading the words, committing them to memory. Something in the back of his mind told him this one was simple, an itch he couldn't quite scratch. The mystery lay in figuring out what the object must be. Once he knew that, it seemed pretty obvious what he needed to do: hit the ground ten times after saying the magic words.

Tick decided it really came down to two phrases:

Let's just say, I hope your soul is stronger than mine

and

the object must be the opposite of wrong but not correct

Thinking, Tick flipped to a blank page in the journal to see if jotting down notes could whip up his brain functions into a frenzy. Staring at the empty lines on the page made him suddenly remember that he'd never written down the odd words Mothball had said that day by the woods when she'd been listing the things she wasn't allowed to mention. Mad at himself for not doing it sooner, Tick squeezed his eyes shut and searched the darkness of his vision, hoping bright neon words would jump out and remind him of what she'd said. One or two did almost immediately, and after a few minutes he'd remembered four and wrote them in a list on the left side of the page.

The Master

The Barrier Wand

The Realities

The Kyooopy

There'd been another weird word that he couldn't quite recall. Nothing else came to him, and he realized his eyes were getting droopy, his brain nice and ready for an afternoon nap. Wanting to check his e-mail—and needing some fresh, cold air to wake him up—he threw his new journal into his backpack and headed off for the library, telling Lisa he'd be back in a couple of hours.

~

“Tick, don't you ever take that scarf off?” Ms. Sears asked, stopping Tick before he could make it to the library computers. He'd spent some time studying his *Journal of Curious Letters*, as well as finishing up the last bit of homework for the weekend, and wanted to check his e-mail account, though he'd yet to receive anything since leaving the hint phrases on the Pen Pal site.

“I guess my neck gets cold pretty easily,” he said, shrugging while he faked a shiver. Of course Ms. Sears knew about his birthmark, but he wanted to avoid a lecture on not being ashamed of who you are. “Any cool books come in lately?”

Her brow furrowed as she thought, making her entire weave of hair shift like a jittery land mass triggered by an earthquake. “There's a new one by Savage, but I think he's too scary for you,” she said, trying to hold back a smile.

Tick rolled his eyes. “I'll take my chances.”

“Okay, but if you have nightmares, tell your mom that I warned you.” She smiled. “I'll hold it up at the counter for you.”

“Thanks, Ms. Sears.” He inched toward the computers, and she got the

message.

“Okay, then,” she said. “Have fun.”

He nodded, then sat down at a computer as soon as she walked away. His mind still spun, the clues of M.G. bouncing around his brain like renegade alphabet soup. He knew several things for sure, and he also knew what he still needed to figure out. For some reason, on May sixth he needed to close his eyes, say some magic words that he didn't know, and hit the ground ten times with an object still left to be determined. Piece of cake.

After logging into his e-mail Web site, he hesitated a second before hitting the INBOX button. He'd checked his e-mail almost every day for weeks, and he was always disappointed to find nothing there. *But what are the odds?* he thought. Who knew if anyone else out there had received anything, much less went searching the Internet for others. But Tick felt like he'd explode if he didn't find someone with whom to swap ideas and thoughts.

He clicked the mouse.

The INBOX page only took a couple of seconds to load and a subject line written all in capital letters caught his eye the instant it appeared. His breath caught in his throat. He stood up in excitement, his chair tipping backward to the ground with a ringing metallic clang. He noticed a few scowls from the other library patrons as he righted the chair and sat down, the skin of his face on fire. Once settled, he looked at the screen again, hoping his eyes hadn't been lying to his brain.

But there it was, in black capital letters, bold against the white background:

From: SOFIA PACINI

Subject: MESSAGES FROM M.G.

Talking to Sofia

As he opened the e-mail, Tick's heart pounded so much he felt like he was trying to breathe underwater. He could hardly believe it; to receive an e-mail from another person experiencing the same mysteries as he was would validate everything once and for all—even more than meeting Mothball or being attacked by the Gnat Rat.

Forcing his eyes to slow down and take in each word, Tick read the e-mail.

Dear Atticus Higginbottom,

I'll write to you in English, since I know you must be a typical American who can only speak Americanese, and my English is, well, brilliant. My name is Sofia Pacini and I live in the pretty Alps in the country of Italy. Do you know where Italy is? Probably not. You're too busy studying the Big Mac and the Spider-Man and not world geography. Maybe you can learn from Sofia and be smart. I'm just teasing you, so please don't cry. :)

I saw your post on the Pen Pal Web site and almost swallowed my shoe. No, I didn't have a shoe in my mouth, it just sounds like something a funny Americanese boy would say.

Tick paused, trying to hold in a laugh since he'd already embarrassed himself enough in front of the library crowd. But this Italian girl . . . *was she for real?* He continued reading.

I got a letter from a person named M.G. in November. You too? At first I laughed and thought it was my friend Tony, but the letter came from Alaska, so I don't know. Then more came, and I met a really tall lady called Mothball. Did you meet her? She's like a walking tree with clothes, but I like her.

So what do you think? Is this for real? What will happen on the day? Did you figure everything out? Find anyone else? Write me back.

Your new friend,

Sofia

P.S. You have a weird name, btw.

Tick hated when the e-mail ended, wishing she'd written him pages and pages of what she thought and felt and if she'd figured out the magic words or anything else. He clicked the REPLY TO SENDER button.

Dear Sofia,

He paused, wondering what in the world he should write to her. The chilling thought hit him that maybe he shouldn't trust her. Maybe she was on the side of whoever or whatever had sent the Tingle Wraith and Gnat Rat. Maybe she was a spy, ready to feed him information leading him away from the solution, not toward it.

That's just a chance I'll have to take, he thought. Shrugging the worry away, he began typing his message.

I know I have a weird name. Everyone calls me Tick, so you can, too.

Sounds like we're in the same boat. I've received three clues now, one of them on a tape. How about you? I met Mothball, too. She gave me the second clue. Maybe we can help each other?

He almost started telling her the things he'd figured out and which ones had him stumped, but decided to wait to see if she would write him back. One more e-mail from her ought to help him know for sure if she was okay. After thinking for a minute, he finished his letter.

I wonder how many others like us are out there. I hope someone else writes me. Let me know if anyone writes to you, OK?

Have you seen anything like a ghost made out of smoke that turns into a grandpa face? What about a Gnat Rat? That thing put me in the hospital, but I'm OK now. How old are you? I'm thirteen, and I live in Washington, though you already know that because I guess you saw my Pen Pal account.

You're from Italy? That's way awesome. I wish we could meet and talk face to face about this stuff. I'm keeping all my notes in a book called Tick Higginbottom's Journal of Curious Letters. Pretty cool, huh?

Talk to you later,

Tick

He clicked SEND, knowing Sofia probably wouldn't read the e-mail until tomorrow because it was already past bedtime in Italy. His initial excitement tempered by the thought that he wouldn't hear back from Sofia for at least a day, he logged off the computer and grabbed his backpack.

On his way out, Ms. Sears reminded him of the book she had held for him and he checked it out just to be nice. With everything going on in his life, reading a new book suddenly seemed dull in comparison. Tick shook his head; he never would've thought he'd say *that*.

The book tucked safely in his backpack next to his journal, Tick exited the library and headed home.

Halfway there, he figured out the answer to the third clue.

~

It came to him when he tripped over a big stick in the middle of the sidewalk. As he rubbed his knee while sitting on the cold ground, he looked at the soles of his shoes, which were caked with chunky black sludge. He wondered where they'd gotten so dirty and had just had the thought that it must've been from the mud caused by the melting snow when both of the important phrases from the third clue seemed to solve themselves simultaneously, several words flashing across his mind's eye in a rush of understanding.

Opposite of wrong but not correct.

Opposite of wrong but not the word correct. The word right!

Soul is stronger than mine.

Sole is stronger than mine.

Sole of his shoe.

Sole of his right shoe.

Not bothering to get up from the sidewalk, Tick whipped out his journal and turned to the page where he'd written the words from the audio tape. He'd misunderstood when M.G. said he hoped Tick's soul was stronger than his. The real word was *sole*, not *soul*, meaning M.G. hoped the sole of his shoe was strong enough to protect his foot, his *right* foot, as he hit the ground with it ten times.

Tick scribbled his thoughts down then stood up, his blood surging through his veins. Though he still felt so clueless it was ridiculous, he'd taken another small step. On May sixth, Tick needed to say magic words that he didn't know then stomp the ground with his right foot ten times.

As he ran the rest of the way home, he couldn't help but marvel at how completely stupid that sounded.

~

Three days passed with no reply from Sofia, and though he'd never met her, Tick felt worried sick that something terrible had happened to her. Or that maybe she'd given up and burned the letter from M.G., surrendering once and for all. Tick could barely think of anything else, losing his focus in school; he actually got a B on a test, shocking his English teacher beyond words. Every morning and night he checked his e-mail at home, and he swung by the library every chance he got.

When an entire week had passed in silence, his heart felt completely ill and he didn't know what else to do but give up on her.

The Thursday before Christmas vacation started, he walked home from school, his head down, staring at his feet through the falling snow. They'd had a couple of weeks' break from the white stuff, but it had come back with a fury the night before and hadn't let up. Tick didn't complain, of course, he loved the heavy snow. But he couldn't cheer up, feeling sad about Sofia and the lack of any more clues from his mysterious stranger.

He was just passing the patch of woods where he'd met Mothball when something caught his eye on the other side of the road. A wooden sign had been hastily nailed to a sharpened stick and hammered into the ground. Some words were painted on it in messy blue paint, the letters dripping like blood. He couldn't tell what most of the sign said from his position, but two of the words stood out like a pair of leprechauns in a hamster cage.

Atticus Higginbottom

Shoes and Mittens

Tick ran over to the sign, squinting his eyes through the swirling snow to read the smaller words underneath his name. His brow crinkled in confusion. He read the sign over again, almost expecting the words to change the second time. Just when he thought he was used to how bizarre his life had become, he received a message that seemed to make no sense.

Atticus Higginbottom

Meet me when night is a backwards dim

Don't look for a her 'cause I am a him

The steps of your porch will do just fine

But don't bring snakes, spiders, or swine

For you I have important news

In return I ask for children's shoes

One more thing, or see me spittin'

Be sure to bring two nice soft mittens

If Tick had woken up that morning and guessed one thousand things a special sign made just for him might have said, a request for children's shoes and mittens would not have made the list. Not knowing what else to do, and not real keen on anyone else seeing the sign, he yanked it up out of the ground and carried it home with him, trying to sort out the message. There didn't really seem to be too many clues in the poem, just a request to meet on the steps of his porch.

Meet me when night is a backwards dim

Tick figured that one out almost instantly. "Dim" spelled backward was "mid," which meant the stranger wanted him to be waiting on his porch at midnight—presumably tonight. The now familiar shiver of excitement tickled Tick's spine as he looked at his watch and saw he still had almost seven hours

to wait.

Bummer, he thought. It was going to be a long evening.

~

At dinner that night, Tick sat with his whole family eating meatloaf, the one thing in the universe his mom cooked that disgusted him like fried toenails. If given the choice, it would've been a tough decision between the two. He absolutely hated, despised, and loathed meatloaf. Yuck.

He forced down a bite or two, then did his best to smash the gray-green blobs of meat into a little ball so it looked like he'd eaten more than he really had. Kayla devoured hers, though she put just as much on the floor as she did in her mouth.

"What's the latest at school?" Dad asked, reaching for the bowl of mashed potatoes.

"Not much. I'm doing okay." Tick realized he'd let his mind get too occupied lately, spending less time with his family. He resolved to do better. They were, after all, just about the only friends he had in the world, besides Mr. Chu.

And Mothball, he thought. *And Sofia. Maybe.*

"Just okay?" Lisa said. "What? Did Einstein Junior get a bad grade or something?"

"Oh, please," his mom said through a snicker as though the idea was the funniest thing that had ever been spoken aloud.

"Well . . . I did get a B on my last English test."

Dead silence settled around the table like he'd just announced he was an alien and was about to have a baby because on Mars the men were the ones who got pregnant. Even Kayla had dropped her wad of meatloaf, staring at him with blank eyes.

"What?" Tick asked, knowing very well what the answer would be.

"Son," his dad said, "you haven't gotten a B on anything since I've known you. And I've known you since the day you were born."

"Yeah," Lisa agreed. "I think the world has stopped spinning."

Tick shrugged, scooping up a mouthful of green beans. "Ah, it's nothing. Maybe I had bad gas that day."

Kayla laughed out loud, then yelled in a sing-songy voice, "Tick had tooty-buns! Tick had tooty-buns!"

That broke everyone up, and dinner continued like normal.

"Anything happen lately with your Pen Pal account?" Mom asked.

Tick almost choked on his potatoes, for a split second worried that somehow his mom had logged into his account and seen the e-mail from

Sofia. But then he realized he was just being a worrywart, her question totally innocent. He'd been doing the Pen Pal thing for a couple of years, still having never really connected with anyone for more than a few letters here and there. No one had ever seemed interesting enough for him to want to stay in touch—or maybe it was the other way around.

“Not really. I got an e-mail from some girl in Italy, but she seems kind of psycho.”

“*Psycho?*” Dad asked. “Why, what did she say?”

“She called me an Americanese boy and asked me a million dumb questions.”

Mom tsked. “Last time I checked, not speaking English well and being curious did not make someone a psycho. Give her a chance. Maybe she likes chess.”

“Maybe she’s cute,” Lisa added. “You could marry her and join the mafia.”

“Sweetheart,” Dad said. “I don’t think everyone from Italy is in the mob.”

“Yeah, it’s probably only like half,” Tick said. He expected Lisa to laugh at his joke, but was disappointed to see she thought he’d been serious.

“Really?” she asked.

“It was a joke, sis.”

“Oh. Yeah, I knew that.”

“Well, anyway,” Dad said, moving on. “I think this weekend we should all go see a movie, go bowling or something. Who’s in?”

By habit, everyone around the table raised their hand. Kayla shrieked as she waved both arms in the air.

“All right, plan on it. Everyone meet right here at noon on Saturday.”

For some reason, right at that moment, the thought hit Tick that he should tell his dad about everything. Keeping the secret was eating away at his insides and now with nothing but silence from Sofia, the feeling was getting worse, not better. Just thinking about telling someone seemed to take a thirty-pound dumbbell off his shoulders.

Next time Mom’s out shopping, he thought. I’ll tell him. Maybe he can help me figure everything out. If he believes me.

Tick put his dishes away, then watched some ridiculous game show on TV with his family. The whole time, he thought of one thing and one thing only.

Midnight.

~

It was time for bed, but Tick wanted to check his e-mail one more time. He felt obsessed, checking it constantly in hopes that Sofia would finally write him back.

He sipped a cup of hot chocolate as he logged into the computer in the living room, almost spilling his drink when he saw Sofia's name in the INBOX. He put his cup down and leaned forward, clicking on her e-mail.

Dear Tick,

Someone needs to teach you how to answer a stinking question. I asked you many and all you did was write back asking me more. If I lived in the USA, I would smack your head with a pogo stick. I am a good, smart Italian girl, and so I will actually answer your questions.

First, I have to tell you that I had a very hard week. Something is chasing me, and I'm very scared. I almost burned the letter five times. Well, not really. When a Pacini makes a decision, a Pacini never goes back. I made my choice, and I'll stick to it like butter on a peanut, or whatever you crazy Americans say.

Anyway, I will now answer your questions.

I have four clues now. I got the last one last night. Maybe you did, too. It's about dead people, which doesn't sound good.

We should definitely help each other.

Saw the ghost thing, but not the rat thing. Don't want to talk about it.

I'm twelve years old, almost thirteen.

I like your journal idea. I made one, too. Hope it's okay to steal your name. Mine is called Sofia Pacini's Journal of Curious Letters. I even used English to make it seem like yours.

I joke a lot, and if we meet you will think I'm crazy. Last summer I beat up seventeen boys. Glad we can be friends.

Ciao (that's Italiano, smart boy)

Sofia

He'd just finished reading the e-mail when his dad told him to log off and go up to bed. Grumbling, he obeyed, hating that he'd have to wait until tomorrow to write Sofia back. He thought about sneaking downstairs after his parents were asleep, but he knew Edgar "Light Sleeper" Higginbottom would catch him as soon as he heard the buzz of the computer fan. It was going to be hard enough to tiptoe through the house and open the door to the front porch at midnight without waking him.

He brushed his teeth and said good night to everyone, then got into bed, his lamp on for reading. He decided to take a break from the fantasy novel he had been reading and pulled out the book by Savage, flipping to Chapter One. Twenty minutes later, he did the worst thing he could possibly do. He fell asleep.

Little Ball of Bread Dough

Tick snapped awake a half-hour after midnight. His alarm clock glowed with evil red numbers, as if they wanted to make sure he knew his mistake was unforgivable.

Jumping out of bed with a groan, he ran to his window and looked outside for any sign of the supposed visitor. He couldn't see the entire porch from his angle, but the steps were visible in the bright moonlight that poked through a break in the clouds. No one was there, and Tick felt his heart sink.

I'm such an idiot!

Maybe he'd messed the whole thing up and lost the trust of M.G. He didn't know who'd painted the sign, but he had no doubt it was related to the M.G. mystery, and he even suspected it was Mothball or maybe her friend Rutger. She'd said he might come visit him. Sofia mentioned in her e-mail that she'd received the fourth clue, but Tick hadn't seen his yet. What if the midnight meeting was supposed to provide it?

Hardly able to stand the frustration and worry, Tick put on some warm clothes, determined to go outside and search for his visitor.

Stepping only on quiet spots in the house, avoiding the most obvious creaks and groans he knew from years of experience, he crept down the stairs and to the front door. After quietly slipping into his coat and boots, then wrapping his scarf tightly around his neck, he very carefully unlocked the deadbolt, then turned the handle. Knowing if he opened the door slowly, it would let out a creak that would wake the dead, he jerked it open in one quick motion, preventing almost any sound at all.

His heart pounding, he stepped out into the bitterly cold night, quietly shutting the door behind him.

After searching the whole yard and finding nothing, he sat on the front porch and put his head into his cupped hands, squeezing his eyes shut in anger at himself. How could he have been so stupid? He should never have lain down to read—everyone knew that was the number one way in the world to make yourself fall asleep. He blew out an exasperated sigh as he leaned back and folded his arms, looking up at the sky. Dark, churning clouds, their edges softly illuminated by the moon hiding behind them, seemed to move across

the sky at an unnatural pace like something from a horror movie in fast forward.

Tick shivered, and he knew it wasn't the cold alone that caused it.

He leaned forward to stand up when something hit him on his right temple, followed by the soft clatter of a rock tumbling down the steps. He looked just in time to see a pebble the size of a walnut come to a rest a few feet away.

Belatedly, he said, "Ow" as he looked around to discover where the rock had come from. Nothing stirred in the darkness, the only sound a slight breeze whispering through the leafless trees in the front yard and sighing over the snow-covered bushes lining the front of the house. He thought one bush may have moved more than the others, and he was just about to investigate when another rock hit him, this time in the right shoulder. Sure enough, the rock came from the suspected bush, the powdery layer of snow almost completely knocked off.

"Who's over there?" he asked, surprised he didn't feel more scared. "Quit throwing rocks like a baby and come out."

The bush rustled again, then a small figure stepped out from behind the branches. It was impossible to make out details in the scant light, but the person looked like a little kid, maybe six or seven years old, bundled up in layers and layers of clothes. He or she resembled nothing so much as a big round ball with little bumps for arms and legs and a head.

"Who are you?" Tick asked, standing up and stepping closer. "Are you the one who left me the note on the sign?"

The little person walked toward him, waddling like an overweight duck. A shaft of moonlight broke through the clouds just as the visitor reached a spot a few feet in front of Tick, revealing in vivid detail what he'd thought was a child.

It was a man. A very short and very fat man.

He was dressed all in black—black sweat pants and sweatshirt, black tennis shoes, black coat, black hat pulled over his ears. Tick's dad had once made a joke that sweat suits were made for people to exercise in, but the only people who seemed to wear them were fat people like himself.

Knowing all too well what it felt like to be made fun of, Tick always tried never to do it to anyone else. As the strange little round man walked up to him, Tick promised himself he would do his best to refrain from all known fat jokes.

"I'm *large*, okay?" the man said, though he barely came to Tick's waist. His voice was normal with no accent or strange pitch. Tick didn't know why that surprised him so much, but then he realized he'd been expecting the guy to sound like one of the Munchkins from *The Wizard of Oz*.

So much for not judging others on their looks.

The short man continued, “And I must be the dumbest fat guy you’ll ever meet, because I wore all black to camouflage myself in a place that is covered in *snow*.”

Tick stared, with no idea how to respond.

“My name is Rutger,” the stranger said, holding a hand up toward Tick. “My hand might be the size of your big toe, but don’t be scared to shake it. Nice to meet you.”

Tick reached down and clasped Rutger’s hand, shaking it very gently.

“What’s that?” Rutger asked. “Feels like I’m grabbing a floppy fish. You think I’m made of porcelain or something? Shake my hand if you’re gonna shake my hand!”

Tick gripped harder and shook, completely amazed by this new person. He finally spoke back. “Sorry. I’m just a little surprised. I didn’t know . . .”

“What? That I’d look like a shrunken Sumo wrestler? Come on, let’s sit and talk awhile. This weight is killer on my tiny legs.” Rutger didn’t wait for a response, walking over to the porch steps and taking a seat on the bottom step. Even then, his feet barely touched the ground in front of him.

Tick smiled, finally feeling at ease, and joined Rutger on the steps. “So, you’re friends with Mothball, right?”

Rutger slapped his round belly. “You betcha I am! That tall stack of sticks is the best friend a man can have, even if she *is* three times my size. Well, up and down, anyway, if you know what I mean.” He raised his hand vertically, as if guessing the height of something. “Ah, Mothball’s a funny one if you get her going. Word to the wise though. Don’t ever ask her about the day she and her twin sis were born unless you have about seven days with nothing else to do but sit and listen.”

Tick grinned. “I’ll remember that. Why’d you throw those rocks at me?”

“Why were you late?”

“I . . . uh, good point. Slept in.”

Rutger looked at Tick intently, searching for something. “Looks like you forgot your assignment, too.”

“I did? What—” Then Tick remembered the poem and what it had asked for. He’d meant to scrounge around in the basement to find some old shoes and mittens. “Oh, never mind—you’re right, I forgot. Sorry.”

Rutger slapped Tick on the shoulder. “It’s okay, I can wait.”

“Huh? You mean . . .”

“That’s right, big fella. Come back with what I asked for and maybe I’ll talk.”

Tick paused before responding, hopeful that Rutger would wink and say he’d only been kidding. “You’re . . . serious?”

Rutger leaned closer like a giant rubber ball rolling forward. “I’ve been to more places in the last two weeks than you’ve seen in your whole life, boy. My shoes are just about ready to call it a day and walk off my feet—no pun intended, though that was a pretty good one. And my hands—cold, young man, *cold*.”

“You mean, the shoes and mittens are for *you*?”

“Who else, boy? Do you think I’d be traipsing around the Realities with a little child stuck to my hip? Of course they’re for me!” His voice had risen considerably, and Tick worried his dad would hear.

“Don’t talk so loud. You’ll wake the whole neighborhood.”

Rutger answered in an exaggerated whisper. “You won’t hear another peep from me until I’m holding a nice new pair of shoes and a warm-as-muffins pair of mittens.” He nodded curtly and folded his arms.

Tick stood up. “I’ll go—but what did you mean when you said the *Realities*?”

“Oh, come on, boy. It’s all about the kyoopy—science, Chi’karda, Barrier Wands!”

Tick stared, wondering if anyone in history had ever answered a question as poorly as Rutger just had. “What are you talking about?”

Rutger put two fingers together and swiped them across his lips, the age-old sign for zipping one’s mouth shut.

“Fine,” Tick muttered. “Be back in a minute.”

He walked up the porch steps and opened the front door. Just before he stepped into the house, Tick heard Rutger say something creepy.

“Good. Because when you get back, we need to talk about dead people.”

Nowhere in Between

Tick wasted five minutes searching for the box in the basement where his old clothes were stored—the ones his mom couldn't bear to part with. He finally spotted it and pulled almost everything out before he found a pile of shoes of varying sizes. He chose three pairs that seemed the closest to Rutger's size, then rummaged through everything else again, searching for mittens or gloves. He found nothing.

He walked back upstairs, still doing his best to keep quiet, and dove into the closet holding all of their winter clothing. He finally came across a pair of yellow mittens his grandma in Georgia had knitted out of yarn a long time ago. They'd been his once, but Kayla had been wearing them ever since she destroyed her own pair in the fireplace. Tick tried not to laugh at the thought that they should fit Rutger just perfectly.

I can't believe I have a Hobbit in my own front yard.

Holding in a snicker, he went outside.

~

"Oh, those will do just fine. Just fine! Thank you." Rutger hurriedly pulled on the mittens, then replaced his worn shoes with a pair of sneakers that Tick must've grown out of very quickly because they still looked relatively new.

"Glad to be of service," Tick said, settling on the step beside his new friend. He shivered from the cold and tightened his scarf around his neck. "Now I think you had a lot to tell me? What was that about dead people?"

The little man rubbed his newly wrapped hands together and leaned against the step behind him. "Ah, yes, dead people. There's a phrase that Mas—" He caught himself before saying anything else, looking at Tick with guilt written all over his face.

"What?" Tick asked.

"Oh, nothing . . . nothing. I was just going to say that there's something a good friend of mine always says: 'Nothing in this world better reflects the difference between life and death than the power of choice.' Says that all the time, my friend does."

"What does that have to do with me?"

Rutger looked at him intently. "What's your name, son?"

"Atticus Higginbottom. Or Tick."

“Yes, that’s right.” Rutger pulled out a notepad and pencil from his pocket, then started scanning it, much like Mothball had done. “There you are, and there we go.” He wrote a checkmark next to Tick’s name, then put the pad and pencil back into his pocket. When he pulled his hand out, this time he was holding a yellow envelope. “I believe you’ve been expecting this.”

“The fourth clue?”

“You got it.”

He handed the envelope to Tick, who immediately ripped it open then pulled out the cardstock containing the next message from M.G. Before he could read it, Rutger placed a pudgy hand on top of the clue.

“Remember what I said about dead people, young man.”

“What exactly *did* you say?”

“Well, nothing really, now that you mention it. Wasn’t supposed to say much, anyhow. It’s for you to figure out.”

“You’ve really cleared things up for me, Rutger, thank you.”

The round man’s eyes narrowed. “Do I sense a hint of sarcasm?”

Tick laughed. “Not just a hint.” He pulled the message out from under Rutger’s hand. “May I please read this now?”

Rutger waved a hand. “Read to your heart’s delight.”

Squinting to see in the patchy moonlight, Tick did just that.

The place is for you to determine and can be in your hometown. I only ask that the name of the place begin with a letter coming after A and before Z but nowhere in between. You are allowed to have people there with you, as many as you like, as long as they are dead by the time you say the magic words. But, by the Wand, make sure that you are not dead, of course. That would truly throw a wrinkle into our plans.

Tick looked over at Rutger. “I can bring people with me, as long as they’re dead before I say the magic words? That doesn’t make any sense.”

The short man smiled and shrugged his shoulders. “Hey, I didn’t write the clues.”

“And how can a letter come after A, before Z, but nowhere in between? Wouldn’t that exclude all twenty-six letters?”

“Who am I, Sherlicken Holmestotter? You figure it out, kid.” He rubbed his arms and shoulders with his mittened hands.

“Sherlicken who? Do you mean Sherlock Holmes?”

Rutger gave him a blank stare. “No, I mean Sherlicken Holmestotter, the greatest detective who ever lived.”

Tick didn’t know what to think of that answer. “So are you going to tell me anything worthwhile or not?”

“I’m leaning toward the *not*, actually.”

“Boy, you and Mothball sure are a lot of help. Why didn’t M.G. just send me letters in the mail like he did with the other stuff?” Tick shivered again, and realized his warm clothes and scarf weren’t enough to block out the freezing cold.

“Nice to meet you, too.” Rutger looked down at the ground, no small feat with his huge belly. “I guess you didn’t want me to come, did you?”

“Hey, I was just kidding.” Tick tried to keep from laughing as he reached out and patted the man’s shoulder. Maybe it was the guy’s size, but Tick felt like he was consoling a little kid. “I’m glad we met. I just wish you could tell me a little more about what’s going on.”

“Trust me, I’m dying to tell everything, but that would defeat the whole point, now wouldn’t it?”

Tick threw his hands up in frustration. “What *is* the point?”

Rutger grew serious. “I think you know, Tick. You’ve made a choice to pursue this endeavor, and no matter what, you must see it to the end. By the very act of making it to the special day, and solving the riddles of what will happen at that time, you will be properly prepared for . . .” He paused, fidgeting with the buttons on his coat.

“For what?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“What a surprise.” Tick wanted to be angry, but instead felt torn between disappointment and eagerness to solve everything at once. He’d always been that way; he wanted to know things right then and now, which was probably one reason why he did so well in school. He often read ahead in his books, curiosity lighting the fire of his impatience, which only added to his status as Nerd-Boy of the Universe.

“I will say this,” Rutger said. “I truly hope you make it, Tick. I want to see you when it all comes down to the boiling point.” He turned his squat little body and looked Tick in the eye. “You’ll be there, I’m sure of it.”

“I’ll try.”

Rutger snorted. “*Try* is for dingbats with no heart. You will *do*, young man, *do*.”

“Who are you—Yoda?”

“Huh?”

“Never mind.”

Rutger stood up with a loud groan, seeming to barely rise in height even though he had his legs straight under him. “Well, must be off to the wild blue yonder. Feels like I haven’t eaten in three weeks.” He patted his stomach. “Boy, I sure do enjoy a lovely meal now and then.” He cleared his throat

loudly, as if trying to give a hint.

“Where are you from, anyway?” Tick asked, trying his best to avoid any subject that dealt with the man’s weight.

“I, young man, am from the Eleventh—the finest place you could ever visit.”

“The Eleventh?”

“Things developed a little differently there, if you know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t know what you mean.”

“Oh. Yes. Well, someday you will.”

Tick sighed. “What were those words you said earlier? Kyoopy, Barrier Wands, chika-something?”

Rutger only raised his eyebrows in reply.

“Let me guess, you can’t tell me.”

“That’s my boy, getting smarter by the minute.” Rutger stretched and let out a big yawn. “Well, it was very nice to meet you, Tick. I expected someone a little more generous with treats and goodies, but what can you do?”

Tick rolled his eyes. “Do you want something—”

“No, no, maybe *next* time you can be a good host,” Rutger replied with no subtlety. “You go on inside and stuff yourself with turkey and beans while little old Rutger walks his long journey home. At least I have new shoes, I guess.”

Little? Tick thought, but wisely didn’t say. “Oh, hang on a minute. You’re a pathetic actor.” He slipped inside the house and grabbed some bread, a bag of cookies, and a couple of bananas, throwing them all into a grocery bag, trying his best to be quiet. He forced himself to take extra precautions with every trip through the front door. He didn’t need his dad waking up to find him giving out free food to a weird little fat guy in the middle of the night.

When he handed the bag to Rutger, the man beamed with joy. “Oh, thank you seven times over, my good man! Thank you, indeed!”

Tick smiled. “You’re welcome. When will I see you again?”

Rutger started down the sidewalk, looking over his shoulder as best he could. “Many tomorrows, I expect, many tomorrows. Good-bye, Master Atticus!”

“Bye.” Tick waved, feeling a pang of sadness as he watched Rutger set off down the road.

~

Edgar watched from the upstairs window in the hallway, his emotions torn between fascination at the miniature fat man that seemed to have struck up a friendship with his son, and his sadness that Tick was involved in something

very strange and had failed to tell his own father about it. He and Tick had always had a special bond, sharing anything and everything. Had things changed so much? Had his boy grown up, leaving his poor father behind to wallow in ignorance?

It all made sense now. Tick had been acting so bizarre lately and the reasons behind it could very well change the way Edgar viewed the world in which he lived. As he'd watched the two speak together on the steps of the porch, he'd readied himself to run outside at the first sign of danger. But the man seemed to be a friend, and Edgar decided to wait a while before he confronted Tick about it.

He told himself he didn't know why he wanted to wait, but his heart knew the truth. Deep inside, he hoped his son would decide to tell him on his own what was going on. Edgar could hold out just a little bit longer—maybe a day or two—watching his son's every move.

Down below, Tick waved as his short friend disappeared down the dark road.

Quickly, Edgar turned and went back to his room.

Smoky Bathroom

The next day was Friday, the last day of school for two weeks, and Tick thought it would never end. Having enjoyed a grand total of four hours of sleep the night before, he nodded off in class constantly, waking with an unpleasant string of drool on his chin more than once. Mr. Chu was the only teacher who gave him a hard time about it, but Tick survived.

Finally, the last bell of the day rang.

Tick was at his locker, the excitement of the coming vacation days perking him up a bit, when disaster struck in the form of a tap on his shoulder. He turned to see Billy “The Goat” Cooper sneering at him with arms folded, his goons gathered behind his massive body.

Just wait it out, Tick, just wait it out.

“Well, looky here,” Billy said, his voice the sound of marbles being crushed in a vice. “Looks like Ticky Stinkbottom and his pet Barf Scarf are excited to go home and wait for Santy Claus. Whatcha getting this year, *Atticus*? A new teddy bear?”

“Yes,” Tick said, stone faced, knowing it would throw the Goat off track.

Billy faltered, surely having expected Tick to adamantly say no or try to walk away. “Well, then . . . I hope . . . it smells bad.”

Tick really wanted to say something sarcastic—*It’s a teddy bear, not a Billy the Goat doll*—but his common sense won out. “It probably will, with my luck,” he said instead.

“Yeah, it *will*. Just like your feet.” Billy snorted out a laugh, and his cronies joined in.

Tick couldn’t believe how idiotic this guy was, but held his face still and said nothing.

“Here’s an early Christmas present for you, Ticky Stinkbottom,” Billy said, and his cronies’ forced laughter ended abruptly. “Stay in your locker for three minutes, instead of the usual ten. Then, go into the bathroom and stick your head in a toilet. Do that and we won’t bother you until we get back from Christmas break. Deal?”

Tick felt his stomach drop because he knew Billy would send a spy to make sure he did what he’d been ordered to do. “With my hair wet, I might catch a cold on the way home.”

Billy reached out and slammed Tick up against the locker, sending a

metallic clang echoing down the hallway. “Then I guess it’s a good thing we don’t have school for two weeks, now isn’t it?” He let go and stood back. “Come on, guys, let’s go.”

As they walked off, Tick lowered his head and stepped into his locker, closing the door behind him.

~

A few minutes later, he stood alone in the boys’ bathroom, staring at his distorted image in a moldy, warped mirror. He pulled down his scarf with two fingers and examined his birthmark, which looked just as ugly as ever. He felt himself sliding into that state of depression he’d visited so often before he had resolved to quit letting the bullies rule his life.

But then he thought of Mothball and Rutger, the letters and clues, and the way they all made him feel *important*. He snapped out of the gloom and doom, and smiled at himself in the mirror.

Forget those morons. I’m not sticking my head in the toilet, spy or no spy.

A moving smudge suddenly appeared on the reflection of his face, like black moss growing across the mirror. Startled, Tick reached out and touched it with his finger, but only felt the cool hardness of the glass. In a matter of seconds, the entire mirror was dark, blacking out everything. Tick took a step back, a shot of panic shooting through him.

The blackness grew, enveloping the wall and the sink, moving outward in all directions. It took on substance, puffing out like black cotton, devouring the entire bathroom wall. Tick spun to see that all the walls and the ceiling were covered now, dark smoke everywhere. The room looked like the result of a five-alarm fire, but Tick couldn’t see flames and felt no urge to cough.

Then, with a great whooshing sound, every bit of the strange smoky substance rushed to the exit of the bathroom in streaks of wispy darkness, coalescing there into a big ball of black smoke. Tick’s heart stuttered to a stop as he realized what hovered between him and the exit.

A Tingle Wraith.

Tick moved to run, but stopped instantly. He had nowhere to go. The Wraith completely blocked the one and only exit out of the bathroom, its dark smoke already forming into the same ancient, bearded face he’d seen in the alley a few weeks ago. Mothball’s words about the creature came back to him, sending a sickening lurch through his body.

If any man, woman, or child hears the Death Siren for thirty seconds straight, their brain turns right to mush. Nasty death, that.

Tick turned to look for another way out. A tiny window let some daylight in, but other than that, there were only stalls and urinals. He ran to the thin slat of a window and grabbed the metal crank bar to open the window. He

twisted the bar clockwise and a horrible screech of metal on metal boomed through the room as the glass slowly tilted outward.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew the Wraith would start its deathly cry soon. He looked over his shoulder and saw the mouth forming into a wide, black abyss.

Tick quickened his pace, cranking the window as hard as he could. It jammed when it reached the halfway point. He pushed and pulled but the lever wouldn't budge. He beat against the glass with both fists, but ended up with bruised knuckles, leaving the dirty glass unbroken. Desperate, he tried to squeeze through the window anyway, pushing one arm through. It didn't take long to see it was hopeless. The crack was too thin.



He ran to the stalls, jumping up on one of the toilets to see if he could lift a ceiling tile and climb up. But it was too far above his head.

And then he heard it, the worst sound to ever beat his eardrums, a cacophony of nightmarish wails. The sound of dying men on a battlefield. The sound of a mom screaming for a lost child. The sound of criminals at the gallows, waiting to drop into their nooses. All mixed together into one horribly terrifying hum.

The Death Siren.

Thirty seconds.

As the Wraith's cry increased in volume with every passing second, Tick squirmed his way onto the top of the stall siding, balancing as it creaked and groaned below him. He held on with one hand and reached up with the other, stretching to see if he could touch the tiles. His fingertip brushed it, but that was all.

Frantic, he jumped back down to the floor and ran out of the stall, spinning in a wide circle, looking for ideas, for a way out.

The Death Siren rose in pitch and volume, growing more horrible by the second. Tick covered his ears with both hands, hoping to quell the noise, but the stifled groan he heard was worse. Spookier. Creepier. He knew it was almost over, that he only had a few more breaths until his brain turned to mush from the loud, haunting cry.

He looked directly at the Tingle Wraith. As he stared at its wispy black face, long and old and sad, its mouth bellowing out the terrible sound, Tick realized he had only one choice.

He dropped his hands from his ears, closed his eyes, and ran straight toward the smoky ghost.

Tick held both arms out in front of him, stiffening them like a battering ram, and charged. He crossed the floor in two seconds, his clenched fists the first thing to make contact. Not knowing what to expect, and his mind half insane knowing the thirty seconds were almost up, Tick threw himself forward with every bit of strength in his legs and feet.

A cold, biting tingle enveloped his hands and arms and then his whole body as he ran straight through the black smoke of the Wraith. The Death Siren took on a different pitch—lower, gloomy. Tick felt like he'd dived into a pool of arctic water, everything muffled and frigid and dark.

But then he was through the Wraith's body, slamming into the wall on the other side. His mind sliding into shock, Tick flung open the bathroom door and threw his body out into the hallway, banging the door shut behind him.

Silence filled the school, but he could still hear a muted ringing in his ears, like the tolling of death bells.

~

Edgar the Wise

Tick crouched on the floor of the hallway, panting for several minutes, exhausted and unable to move another inch. He kept looking at the crack under the bathroom door, sure the Tingle Wraith would follow him, but nothing came out. Mothball had told him the Wraiths couldn't move very much once they were positioned and formed. Their weapon was the Death Siren.

He finally stood, his nerves and heart settling back to normalcy, filled with relief. Tick felt sure the creature had gone away. Shaking his head as he remembered the horrible feeling of running *through* the Wraith, he set off for home, knowing what he had to do.

It was time to have a little chat with Dad.

~

The next few hours seemed to take days. Tick did his best to act normal: showering to wash away the icky feel of the Tingle Wraith, joking around with Mom and Lisa, playing with Kayla, reading. When his dad finally came home from work, Tick wanted to take him up to his room right that minute and spill the whole story. He couldn't do this alone anymore. He needed support, and Sofia was just too far away.

But Tick had to wait even longer because after dinner, Dad challenged Tick to a game of Scrabble, which he usually loved, but tonight seemed to drag on longer than ever before. To liven things up, he put down the word "kyoopy," at which his dad had a fit, demanding a challenge. Tick held in a snicker as he lost the challenge and had to remove the word, losing his turn. He still won by forty-three points.

Finally, as they were cleaning up the game, Tick managed to casually ask his dad to come up to his room for a minute.

"What's going on, son?" his dad asked, sitting on Tick's bed, one leg folded up under the other. "You've been acting a little strange lately."

Tick paused, running through the decision one last time in his head. This was it, no turning back. He couldn't tell his dad about everything tonight and then say he was kidding tomorrow.

All or nothing, now or never.

He chose *all* and *now*.

“Dad, there’s a good reason I’ve been acting so crazy.” Tick leaned down and pulled his *Journal of Curious Letters* from underneath the bed where he’d stowed it away that morning. “Remember that letter I got a few weeks ago? The one from Alaska?”

“Yeah. Let me guess—it wasn’t from a nice Pen Pal buddy?”

“No, it was from a stranger, saying he was going to send me a bunch of clues in hopes I could figure out something important that could end up saving a bunch of people.” He paused, expecting his dad to say something, but he only got a blank look, ready to hear more. “I thought it was a joke at first, but then weird things started happening—like the Gnat Rat—and I started receiving the clues and I’ve met some very interesting people and I believe it’s true, Dad. I *know* it’s true.”

Tick expected a laugh, a chastisement, a lecture on not playing make-believe when you’re thirteen years old. But his heart lifted at his dad’s next words.

“Tell me everything, from the beginning.”

And Tick did.

~

It took thirty minutes, and Tick showed his dad every page and note of his journal, hiding nothing, repeating every word he could remember of his conversations with Mothball and Rutger. He told it all, and when he finished, he felt like three loads of concrete had been lifted from his chest.

His dad held the journal in his hands, staring at the front cover for a long minute. Tick waited anxiously, hoping with all his heart that his dad would believe him and offer help.

“Tick, you’re my son, and I love you more than anything in this world. This family is the only thing in the universe I give a crying hoot about and I’d do anything for any one of you guys. But I need some time to digest this, okay?”

Tick nodded.

“I’m going to take your journal. I’m going to study it tonight. And I’m going to think long and hard about everything you’ve told me. Tomorrow night, we’ll meet again right here in this very spot. And if anything weird or dangerous happens, you find me, you call me, whatever you have to do. Deal?”

“Deal. Just let me copy down the fourth clue so I can work on it while you have my book.”

When he was finished, the two hugged, his dad left the room, and Tick fell asleep with no problem at all.

~

The next night, Tick sat at his desk in the soft golden glow of his lamp, studying the fourth clue he'd scribbled on a piece of paper, waiting for his dad to come. Something about this riddle made him think it wasn't as hard as it first seemed, and he read it again, thinking carefully about each word.

The place is for you to determine and can be in your hometown. I only ask that the name of the place begin with a letter coming after A and before Z but nowhere in between. You are allowed to have people there with you, as many as you like, as long as they are dead by the time you say the magic words. But, by the Wand, make sure that you are not dead, of course. That would truly throw a wrinkle into our plans.

Tick closed his eyes and thought.

It really came down to two hints: the letter the place begins with and the thing about dead people. The word that kept popping into his mind when he thought about the latter was *cemetery*. It matched the clue perfectly—a lot of people would be there and they'd all be dead. The way M.G. worded it made it sound like Tick would have to kill people or something, but he obviously didn't mean that, it was just a clever twist of language. The place where he was supposed to go on May sixth had to be a cemetery.

And yet, what about the letter it begins with? *After A and before Z*, but nowhere in between . . .

“Son?”

Tick snapped back to reality and turned to see his dad standing in the doorway. “Hi, Dad.” He stood from his desk chair and went over to sit on the bed, in the same position as last night. A surge of anxiety swelled in his chest, hope and fear battling over his emotions as he awaited the verdict.

His dad joined him, a somber look on his face, his eyes staring at the *Journal of Curious Letters* gripped in both of his hands. “Tick, I've read through this a million times and thought about it all day.” He finally looked at his son.

“And you think I'm psycho.” Tick was amazed that at the same time he could both want and not want his dad to tell him what he thought of everything.

“No, not at all. I believe it. All of it.”

Tick couldn't suppress the huge grin that shot across his face. “Really?”

His dad nodded. “There's something I didn't tell you last night. I, uh, saw you talking to the little man you called Rutger. I saw for myself he was real. And the whole thing about those gnats. I can't get that out of my mind. Then there's the letter from Alaska. I know you don't know anyone up there.” He

shook his head. “It’s a lot of evidence, son. A lot.”

“So you—”

His dad held up a hand, cutting off Tick. “But that’s not why I’m convinced.”

“It’s not?”

“No.” His dad leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees. “Tick, I’ve known you for thirteen years, and I can’t think of a time when you’ve ever lied to me. You’re too smart to lie, too good of a person. I trust you, and as I looked into your eyes as you told me this crazy story, I knew it was true. Now, I wanted some time to think about it and such, but I knew.”

Tick wanted to say something cheesy and profound, but all that came out was, “Cool.”

His dad laughed. “Yeah, cool. I can feel it deep down that this is important and that you were chosen to help because you’re a special kid. There’s always been something almost magical about you, Tick, and I think I knew that someday your life would take a turn for the unique. We’ve never really talked about it, but I’ve always felt like you had a guardian angel or some kind of special gift. These letters and clues and all this weird stuff has to be related somehow.”

Tick didn’t really know what his dad was talking about, and didn’t care—he was too excited about finally having someone nearby who knew what was going on. “So you’ll help me figure it out?”

“Now, maybe I can help a little here and there with the riddles but”—he pointed a finger at Tick—“you better believe I’m going to be the toughest bodyguard anyone’s ever had. All this dangerous stuff scares me too, you know?” He reached out and gave his patented bear hug, then leaned back. “So where do we go from here?”

Tick shrugged. “I guess we just keep getting the clues and hope we can figure everything out by May sixth.”

His dad scratched his chin, deep in thought. “Yeah . . .” He seemed doubtful or troubled.

“What?”

“I was thinking maybe this M.G. guy expects you to be a little more proactive. You know, dig a little deeper to find out what’s going on.”

“Dad, I can tell you’re thinking really hard ’cause it looks like you might bust a vein.”

His dad ignored the joke. “You have two weeks off from school for Christmas, right?”

“Right.”

“And I have plenty of vacation time . . .” He paused. “But what would we

do about your mom? I don't want her involved in this. She'd worry herself to the deathbed quicker than she can make a batch of peanut-butter cookies."

"Dad, what are you talking about?"

His dad's eyes focused on Tick. "I think we should do a little investigating."

"Investigating?"

"Yeah." He reached out and squeezed Tick's shoulder. "In Alaska."

~

By the next evening, Edgar had it all arranged, in no small part due to his clever and cunning mind, he kept telling himself. After using the Internet to discover that Macadamia, Alaska, was only three hours' drive from where his Aunt Mabel lived in Anchorage, everything fell into place. Edgar hadn't seen his aunt in years, and his mother had told him awhile back that Mabel's health wasn't doing so well. She'd stayed in Alaska even after her fisherman husband died over a decade ago, insisting that her failing heart, hemorrhoids, and severely bunion-infested feet would make a move impossible.

The plan was set, the tickets purchased, the rental car reserved.

In ten days, just after Christmas, Edgar and Tick would fly to Anchorage, Alaska, for a three-day visit with Aunt Mabel.

Lorena had grilled Edgar on how crazy it sounded to go on vacation on such short notice, but Edgar played it cool, claiming he'd been thinking about his aunt ever since Tick had gotten the letter from Alaska. And the winter break gave them the perfect opportunity.

He also used the excuse that because the tickets were expensive, only two people could afford to go. Plus Tick had been a baby the last time he had seen his great-aunt, so he didn't know her at all. Kayla was too young to appreciate the trip, and Lorena and Lisa seemed more than pleased to not have to go to a bitterly cold land of ice and snow in the middle of winter when the sun would only peek above the horizon for a couple of hours a day. Finally, Edgar pulled out all the stops, asking Lorena if she really was in the mood to hear Mabel tell her the fifty top things she'd done wrong in her life.

Lorena kissed Edgar and told him to have a good time.

When Edgar told the news to his aunt over the phone, she almost blew up his left eardrum with her shrieks of excitement. Of course, she soon settled down and told him to be sure and bring lots of warm clothes, to remember his toothbrush, to have earmuffs for baby Atticus, and about one hundred other pieces of advice.

All in all, the plan fell into place quite nicely.

Edgar only hoped that once they got to Alaska, Mabel would quit talking long enough to allow them to investigate the town of Macadamia.

Someone had sent that first letter.
And Edgar meant to find out who.

An Odd Christmas Present

Tick had felt so relieved that his dad believed his story and wanted to help, the whole Alaska expedition didn't really hit him until the next day when his dad told him he'd bought airline tickets. His dad seemed to think they could find out who mailed the original letter and get more information from him or her. Tick thought a trip to Alaska seemed plenty exciting all by itself, and he could barely stand having to wait ten more days.

Every day of Christmas vacation, Tick and Sofia exchanged e-mails, finally getting into a consistent groove of answering questions and learning more about each other. Tick could tell Sofia was feisty and confident—not someone to mess with unless you wanted a nice kick to the shin, or worse. She was also very smart, and Tick rarely noticed a language barrier. He felt like they were similar in many ways and he found himself liking her very much. They even played chess online, though it took almost a week to finish one game because of the time difference.

Sofia was the first to figure out the last piece of the fourth clue—the first letter of the special place. At first, Tick worried they were violating some rule by helping each other with the clues, but Sofia pointed out that none of the letters said they couldn't. In her opinion, the guy in charge should be impressed they'd had the initiative to seek out others and collaborate.

Tick felt dumb when Sofia told him the answer.

I only ask that the name of the place begin with a letter coming after A and before Z but nowhere in between.

Tick already suspected the clue pointed them to a cemetery, but it was Sofia who explained that cemetery began with a "C," a letter that was certainly after A and before Z in the alphabet. *Also, the letter was nowhere to be found in the word "between."* That's what the sentence had meant, which now seemed painfully obvious to Tick.

They wondered about *which* cemetery to go to, since any decent-sized town had more than one. But the wording of the clue made it clear that the particular place they went to didn't matter, as long as it was a cemetery. Sofia would choose one in her hometown at the appointed time, and Tick would do likewise.

Of course, both of them recognized how strange it was that they had to go

to a graveyard but that it didn't matter which one. But everything about the whole mess was odd, so they were getting used to it.

Tick was really happy to have found Sofia; for the first time in a long while he felt like he had a friend. Yeah, she lived in Italy and liked to beat up boys, but beggars couldn't be choosers. He couldn't wait to get the next clue and talk to her about it.

On Christmas Day, he got his wish.

~

It had been a perfect couple of days. Snow fell in billions of soft, fluffy flakes, blanketing the yard and the house in pure white, covering up the dirt and grime that had begun to show up after a couple of weeks without a fresh snowstorm. The classic songs of Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra floated through the house like warm air from the fire. Tick's mom went all out in the kitchen, cooking up everything from honey-baked ham to stuffed bell peppers, cheesy potatoes to fruit salad, chocolate-covered peanut butter balls to her famous Christmas cookies, which were full of coconut, butterscotch, pecans, walnuts, and several other yummy surprises.

Tick was stuffed and happy, remembering once again why the holiday season had always been his favorite time of year. And it only helped matters that he'd be heading to Alaska in a couple of days. Life was sweet.

After the hustle and buzz and laughter of Christmas morning, tattered wrapping paper lying about in big colorful piles, Tick sat back on the couch, staring at the new goodies he'd received: three video games, some new books, a couple of gift certificates, lots of candy. He usually felt a twinge of sadness once all the presents had been opened, knowing it would be 365 long days until the next Christmas. But today he felt none of that. He felt content and warm, excited and happy.

The mystery of M.G. and his Twelve Clues had brought a new light to Tick's life and, despite the dangers that came with the letters, he'd never felt more alive.

He looked up at the decorated tree, its dozens of white lights sparkling their reflection in the red metallic balls and silver tinsel. Something square and bulky tucked behind a large nutcracker ornament caught his attention. He'd looked at this seven-foot tree a thousand times in the last month, and he knew the thing buried in the branches hadn't been there before this morning.

Instantly alert, he looked around to see what his family was doing. His mom had her nose in a book, his dad was in the kitchen, Lisa had earphones on listening to her new CDs, and Kayla played with her kitchen set, making pretend pancakes and eggs. Trying to look nonchalant, Tick got up from the couch and walked over to the tree, staring at the spot that had caught his eyes.

A box, wrapped in an odd paper with pictures of fairies and dwarves and dragons, was snuggled between two branches, held up by a string of lights. The words, “From M.G.” were clearly scrawled across the box in blue ink. Tick looked around one more time before he snatched the unopened present and stealthily placed it with his other things. Then, grabbing a big armful of stuff, including the mystery box, he headed upstairs to his room.

He sat on his bed and stared at the strange wrapping paper. The present itself was very light and he felt certain the next clue must lie inside. But who had put it there, and when? He ripped the paper off a plain white cardboard box. After flipping open the lid, Tick saw exactly what he’d expected.

The fifth clue. He pulled out the cardstock paper and read the message.

Everything will fail unless you say the magic words exactly correct. It behooves me to remind you that I cannot tell you the words, nor will I in the face of any amount of undue pressure you may apply toward me. Which, of course, would be quite difficult for you to do since you don’t know who I am and since I live in a place you cannot go.

Best of luck, old chap.

Tick read the clue a couple more times, then glued the cardstock into his journal. He thought about the trick used in the fourth clue with the word *between*. Something similar could be happening here.

Everything will fail unless you say the magic words exactly correct.

Say the magic words exactly correct. Could “exactly correct” be the magic words? Tick thought it would be really dumb if that were the answer; plus, he’d been told the first letter from M.G. would reveal the special words, not one of the later clues.

Tick closed the book, frustrated. This new message told him nothing he didn’t already know, only that he had to say something specific when the day came, something *magic*. Other than that, M.G. just seemed to be rubbing it in that he wouldn’t tell Tick what the words were—neener, neener, neener.

Disappointed, wondering if he was missing something obvious, and still baffled at how the present had gotten into his family’s Christmas tree, Tick went downstairs and e-mailed Sofia about the fifth clue. Knowing she probably wouldn’t respond for awhile, he joined his dad in the kitchen, sharing the news as he started snacking on everything in sight.

~

Sofia wrote him back that night, which would have been early the next morning her time. His heart lifted when he saw her name in the INBOX and

he quickly clicked on the message.

Dear Tick,

I got the Fifth Clue, too. Doesn't say much, does it? I think your idea that the magic words are "exactly correct" is just what you say. Stupid. No way, too easy.

I'm sure you're excited for the big trip to Alaska with your dad. You'll probably get lost and eaten by a polar bear. Your funeral will have the coffin closed because all that will be left is your right pinky finger. Just kidding. I hope you escape alive.

I thought I saw a man spying on me yesterday. He looked mean, but disappeared before I got a look. Not good.

Have fun in Ice Land. Write me as soon as you return.

Ciao,

Sofia

Tick reread the sentences about the man spying on her. Sofia threw that in like she was telling him she'd bought a new pair of socks. If some creepy-looking dude was watching her, chances were he'd be coming after Tick next. Unless someone was already spying on Tick and he hadn't noticed? He felt the familiar shiver of fear run up and down his spine, once again reminded that this M.G. mystery business wasn't all fun and games.

He wrote a quick note back to Sofia, telling her to be careful and that he'd write her again the second he got back from Alaska. He was just about to log off when he heard the chime of his e-mail program. When the new e-mail message popped up, Tick felt like an icy fist had smashed his heart into pulp.

From: DEATH

Subject: (no subject)

His stomach turning sour, Tick clicked on the e-mail. It only had one line of text.

See you in Alaska.

The Land of Ice and Snow

Two days later, Tick and Edgar sat in their seats on the airplane, thirty-thousand feet in the air, soda and stale pretzels making them look forward to a much better meal once they landed in Anchorage. Tick sat by the window, his dad's oversized body wedged into the aisle seat like a Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade balloon stuffed into the back of a pickup truck. The steady roar of the plane's engines made Tick feel like his ears were stuffed with cotton.

The two of them had discussed the fifth clue and the strange e-mail from "Death" many times over, with no progress. Tick didn't know who was more determined to figure everything out—him or his dad. They'd gotten much braver—or dumber—with every passing day, to the point they were willing to ignore an obvious and outright warning like the one received in the e-mail. They were going, and that was final.

"We need to keep a sharp lookout," his dad said through a mouthful of pretzels. "If either one of us sees something suspicious, yell it out quickly. When in doubt, run. And we need to stay in public as much as possible."

"Dad, I'd say you sound like a paranoid freak, but I agree one hundred percent." Tick took a sip of his drink. "I think I'm half excited and half scared to death."

"Hey, we're committed, right? There's no turning back now."

"Cheers." They clicked their plastic cups together.

In two hours, they'd be in Alaska.

~

Seven rows back, a tall man with black hair and razor-thin eyebrows crouched in his tiny seat as best he could, reading the ridiculous in-flight magazine, which was full of nothing but advertisements and stupid articles about places he'd never care to visit. This spying business was deathly boring, and he hated it. No action, no results, boring, boring, boring.

But all of that would change very soon. The Spy would become the Hunter.

His name was Frazier Gunn, and he'd worked more than twenty years for Mistress Jane. He despised the woman, *loathed* her, in fact. She was the cruelest, most selfish, despicable, horrifying creature he'd ever met, and yet, his devotion to her was absolute. An odd mixture of feelings, but that's how it

had to be when you served someone who planned to take over the Realities. They needed a leader like her, ruthless and without conscience. He didn't have to like her—he only needed to *pretend* to like her.

Because someday he planned to replace her.

Of course, if he ever failed even one of his assigned missions, she'd feed him to the Croc Loch near the Lemon Fortress with no remorse. But he was safe for now and had been promised a great reward if he could unlock the secret behind the bizarre series of letters Master George had sent out to kids all over the world. He had only recently discovered the identities of several recipients, enabling him to further his investigation with stealth and caution. But finally, the time for intimidation and action was at hand.

It'd been a fun trick sending the "Death" e-mail to the boy named Atticus, quite clever in fact. It was the dumb kid's own fault for putting his information about the letters on the Internet for anyone to find. There'd been a slight risk that Atticus might've chickened out and not gone to Alaska, thereby ruining a chance to learn more for Mistress Jane, but Frazier couldn't resist the calculated threat.

He reached into his pocket to feel the reassuring lump of the special *thing* he'd brought along to perform the important task he planned. He couldn't wait to activate it; the devices they'd retrieved from the Fourth Reality were so much fun, futuristic and deadly. The spectacle would make all the hours of spying on the brats around the world worth every minute.

And if it didn't work, there was always Plan B. Or C. Or D.

Giving up on the magazine, Frazier Gunn leaned back and closed his eyes. The boy and his father couldn't very well disappear on an airplane, now could they?

~

Tick felt so relieved when he and his dad were finally in the rental car, bags safely stowed away in the trunk, heading down the frozen freeway to Aunt Mabel's house. Even though it was still mid-afternoon, the land around them had grown dark, the sun's brief journey above the horizon having ended an hour ago.

Tick held a map in his lap, navigating for his dad. Mabel lived on the outskirts of Anchorage in a small suburb that seemed pretty easy to find. Most of the way followed one main road that stretched endlessly before them, the faded yellow lines of the lane markers seeming to flash then disappear beneath the car.

"Well, Professor," Dad said. "Prepare yourself for Aunt Mabel. She's quite the character and full of more ideas on how to save your life than you'll probably care to hear. Just know that she means well and do a lot of nodding."

“I’m excited to meet her.”

His dad laughed. “You should be, you should be. Trust me, if you want entertainment, we’re going to the right place.”

They’d eaten at a fast food restaurant before heading out from the airport, and Tick still had his soda, from which he took a big long swallow. “You think she’ll mind when we go exploring out to Macadamia?”

“You can bet your life savings she’ll mind, all right, but, oh well. We’ll tell her we didn’t want to waste such a good opportunity to see the sights of this beautiful land she calls home. That’ll get her, I hope.”

“When do you think we’ll drive out there? Tomorrow morning?”

“Sounds good to me. That’ll give us the whole evening with Mabel tonight, and breakfast tomorrow—she makes a mean plate of eggs, bacon, the works. Hopefully, we can figure some things out and return to her place tomorrow night.”

“I just hope Macadamia isn’t a dead end.”

His dad reached over and patted Tick on the leg. “No, we’ll find something. It couldn’t have been a ghost that sent that letter, now could it?”

“Judging by what I’ve seen lately? Maybe.”

“Good point.”

Tick studied the map. “Looks like you turn into her neighborhood up there to the right.”

Edgar flipped on the blinker as he slowed the car.

~

A mile or so behind, Frazier Gunn pulled off the road and stopped, not wanting to take any chances of being spotted. He’d wait an hour or so, then find himself a discreet parking space where he could watch the house. The boy and his father would probably spend the night, saving their planned expedition to Macadamia for tomorrow.

Frazier wanted to see what they discovered there before he put his plan into action. Every little bit of information on what Master George was up to might help Mistress Jane’s cause, and Frazier meant to find out everything he could. When the two adventurers drove back to Anchorage after their investigation, he’d implement the device that sat in his pocket, ready and hungry to get to work.

He grinned at the thought.

~

Tick and his dad stood in front of the door to Aunt Mabel’s home, staring at the plastic flowered wreath that must’ve hung there for two or three

decades—its every surface covered in dust. The house itself was a cold and weary pile of white bricks, but the warm light shining through colorful curtains in the windows made it seem like the coziest place on Earth.

However, neither of the Higginbottoms moved to push the doorbell just yet.

“Well, here we are,” Dad said. A thick layer of snow and ice covered the yard around them; it looked like a miserably frigid wasteland that hadn’t seen the full sun in years.

“Here we are,” Tick repeated, gripping his suitcase.

“Now, one last warning.” Dad looked at his son. “Aunt Mabel is at least one hundred and fifty years old, she laughs like a hyena, and she smells like three tubes of freshly squeezed muscle ointment.”

Tick grinned. “Good enough for me. I love ancient history and watching nature shows, and I don’t mind the smell of peppermint.”

His dad nodded. “That’s the spirit. Let’s do this thing.” He reached out and pushed the doorbell button.

Three seconds later, Aunt Mabel pulled the door open.

Old, Funny, and Smelly

“Little Edgar!” she yelled, a shriek that sounded like fighting cats. The intense smells of peppermint and homemade cooking wafted out of the house with the warm air, and Tick had to suppress a laugh.

Aunt Mabel looked as ancient as Tick’s dad had indicated, her heavily wrinkled but thin face covered in at least three pounds of makeup, capped off by bright red lipstick covering a lot more than her lips, as if she’d been jumping rope when she applied it that morning. Her small body seemed too frail to support the loud burst of excited salutations that came from her lungs as she hugged both Edgar and Tick.

“So good to see you! So glad you made it safe! About time you came to visit your poor old Auntie!”

Tick returned the hug, suddenly feeling very relieved and at home. She was family after all, and this trip obviously meant the world to an old widow who lived alone. Despite the icy cold weather, Tick felt warm inside and looked forward to getting to know his great-aunt Mabel—though he had to admit she did scare him a *little*.

“Well, come in, come in!” she said, her fake teeth sparkling as her face lit up like a giddy clown. “I need to sit these bones down—my bunions are inflamed like you wouldn’t believe. Take off your coats and such—especially that hideous scarf, young man.” She gestured to the side of the foyer where they put their coats and bags—Tick left his scarf on by habit, despite what she’d said—then Mabel led them into a small living room where a couple of couches covered in orange velvet beckoned for them to sit. A dusty lamp with beads hanging from the shade glowed a dull yellow from its stand on a chipped wooden end table. The entire house looked like it had been decorated with props from a really old TV show.

Once they were settled, Aunt Mabel brought in three steaming hot cups of herbal tea; it tasted like boiled cardboard but warmed Tick very quickly. He leaned back on the soft couch and put his foot up on his knee, eager to see Mabel in action.

“Well, land’s sake, it’s a delight to see you boys,” she started. “Living up here at the North Pole with nothing but seventeen quilts and a couple of icicles to keep you company makes a woman grow old quicker than she should. And let me tell you, when you were born before any of your

neighbor's *grandparents*, you can forget having friends come over to play pinochle and watch reruns of *Andy Griffith*." Mabel paused, but only long enough to take in a huge gasping breath. "There's this boy that lives down the corner—mean as a snake, I tell you. He came over to shovel my driveway after the last storm, but he *didn't* put salt on the sidewalk to melt the ice. The nerve of that young troublemaker . . ."

After coming from the wintry air into a nice warm house, and after a long day of busy travel, Tick felt his eyelids dropping as Aunt Mabel continued to rant about each of her neighbors and their various faults and crimes. He tensed his muscles in an attempt to wake himself up.

" . . . and Missus Johnson down the road—I'm pretty sure she's a *spy* for the Homeland Security International Espionage and Intelligence Spy Division. Always snooping, asking questions, you know. Just the other day, I was taking my garbage out to the road as she was walking by. Do you know what she said to me?"—Mabel didn't pause long enough for anyone to answer—"She had the nerve to ask me how my *health* was doing. I tell you right here and now I bet she wants to set up a sting operation from this house once I'm dead and gone, buried like a sack of dirty clothes in the town dump. And Mr. King up by the corner—did you know he has *thirteen* children? And every last one of them the spawn of the devil or my name isn't Mabel Ruth Gertrude Higginbottom Fredrickson."

And so it went for at least another twenty minutes, Tick finally having to pinch himself to stay awake. His dad seemed pleased as could be, smiling and nodding the entire time, throwing out a few "Hmms" and "Uh-huhs" every now and then. Finally, as though she'd exhausted her capacity to use her frail body's vocal cords, Mabel stopped talking and leaned back in her seat.

"Uh, wow," Dad mumbled, caught off guard that his aunt had actually quit yapping. "Sounds like your life is a lot more interesting than you let on, Aunt Mabel. We're sure glad we could come and visit you." He looked over at Tick, raising his eyebrows.

Tick straightened in his seat. "Yeah, I'm really excited I finally got to meet you." He raised his cup as if saluting, and immediately felt like an idiot.

"You boys aren't mocking me, are you?" Mabel asked, her eyes narrowing.

"No!" Tick and his dad said in unison.

"Good. Let's eat some supper." She squirmed in her seat, but couldn't move an inch. "Atticus, dear boy, be a gentleman and assist your elders." She held out a hand.

Tick jumped up and gently helped her stand, then escorted her into the cramped but cozy kitchen.

A wave of mouth-watering smells bombarded them when they entered, and Tick proceeded to eat the most scrumptious meal he'd had in a long time,

which was saying a lot considering how good of a cook his mom was. There were freshly baked rolls soaked in butter, grilled chicken with lemon sauce, corn on the cob, mashed potatoes with chunks of garlic—all of it delicious.

Aunt Mabel talked the entire time they ate, covering every topic from her ingrown toenail to how she'd finally lost her last tooth to decay, but Tick barely heard her, enjoying three more helpings of the fantastic dinner.

~

Frazier crept up to the car of his prey, his eyes flickering to the house of the old woman. He'd watched their shadows leave the front room and head deeper into the house, probably to the kitchen for dinner. The thought made his stomach rumble and he resolved to bag this place and find something to eat as soon as he'd accomplished his task. Even expert spies like himself had to chow down every once in a while.

He crouched behind the left front tire, making sure the body of the car stayed between him and the house. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the special device—an oval-shaped metal container, about eight inches long and three inches wide, a seam wrapped around the middle. On one side of the seam, several buttons and dials poked out. Frazier looked at the familiar label on the other side—the label that marked items taken from the Fourth Reality:

Manufactured by Chu Industries

He split the little machine into two pieces along the seam, slipping the part with the controls back into his pocket. The other half, with its dozens of wires and clamps coiled inside like poisonous snakes ready to wreak havoc, didn't look nearly as menacing as it should, considering what Frazier knew it could do to something like a car. More precisely, what it would do, indirectly, to the people *inside* the car.

Frazier snickered, then reached underneath the tire well to place the Chu device as far and as deep as he could toward the engine. He pushed the small button in the middle and heard a hiss followed by a metallic clunk as the gadget reached out with tiny claws and adhered itself to the car. A spattering of tiny clicks rang out as the machine crawled its way to where it needed to go.

Smart little devices, these things. In a matter of moments, the beautiful but deadly trinket would find exactly what it needed.

Once in place, it only needed Frazier's signal to come alive.

~

Aunt Mabel must think I'm three years old, Tick thought.

It all started at bedtime. Mabel followed Tick into the bathroom and pulled a container of floss from a dusty cabinet. She yanked off a three-foot long

piece and handed it to Tick.

“Now, catch every nook and cranny,” she said as Tick started threading the minty string between his two front teeth. “You never can tell what nasty little monsters are having a nice meal of your gums.”

Tick finished and threw the used floss into a small wastebasket, wishing Mabel would leave him alone. When she didn’t move an inch, hovering behind him as he stared into the mirror, Tick reached over and grabbed his toothbrush and toothpaste. Warily glancing back at Mabel, he finally turned on the water and started brushing.

“Here, let me take a turn,” Mabel said a few seconds later. To Tick’s horror, she reached around his shoulder and grabbed the toothbrush from his hand and began vigorously scrubbing his teeth, pushing his head down lower with her other hand. Tick never would’ve thought such an old and frail woman could have so much strength in her arms. “Gotta get those molars!” she yelled with enthusiasm.

Next came pajama time. Tick had brought a pair of flannel pants and a T-shirt to sleep in, but that was not good enough for Aunt Mabel. She went to the basement and dug through some boxes before returning with a musty old pair of long johns that were as red as her lipstick and looked like Santa’s underwear. Tick begrudgingly put them on, heeding his dad’s pleas that they do everything humanly possible to make the old woman happy so nothing jeopardized their trek the next day. He almost broke his promise when Mabel topped everything off by twisting a scratchy wool stocking cap onto his head. Instead, he forced a grin and followed her to the bed she’d prepared for him.

After tucking him in with no fewer than seven thick quilts, Mabel kissed him on the forehead and sang him a bedtime song, which sounded like a half-dead vulture warning its brothers that the chickenhawk he’d just eaten was poisonous. Tick closed his eyes, hoping that if Mabel thought he was asleep, he could avoid an encore. Satisfied, Aunt Mabel tiptoed out of the room—making sure before she closed the door that the night-light she’d plugged in worked properly.

Tick rolled over, wondering if his great-aunt would do the same routine with his dad. When he finally quit laughing at the image of Mabel brushing his dad’s teeth, Tick fell asleep.

~

The next morning, after a wonderful meal of eggs, bacon, sausage, cheese biscuits, and freshly-squeezed orange juice, and after a long lecture on how important it was *not* to talk to strangers, especially those holding guns or missing any teeth, Tick and his dad were able to escape for a day of “exploring the wonders of Alaska.” Aunt Mabel seemed exhausted from her

efforts and couldn't hide the fact that she was almost relieved to get some rest from taking care of the boys.

After filling up the car with gas and junk food, Tick and his dad began their three-hour journey, the *Journal of Curious Letters* sitting on the seat between them.

Next stop: Macadamia, Alaska.

Going Postal

After driving down the straightest road Tick had ever seen—with nothing but huge piles of snow and ice on either side—they pulled into the small town of Macadamia right around noon. The first thing they did was stop at a gas station to fill up the car for the drive back so they wouldn't have to do it later. The cracked and frozen streets were deserted, with only a few cars parked along the main road in front of various dilapidated shops and dirty service centers.

“Well, I figure we have about six hours until we need to head back,” Tick’s dad said as he started the car again. “Or, if we don’t discover anything today, we can always call Aunt Mabel and tell her we got stuck somewhere for the night and that we’ll come back tomorrow. She won’t want us taking any risks.”

“Yeah,” Tick said. “But she’ll be spitting nails if I’m stranded at some nasty hotel without her there to brush my teeth for me.”

His dad laughed. “You’re a good sport, Professor. Now you know why your mom and Lisa were just fine letting the two of us come up here alone.” He put the car into gear and drove away from the gas station. “The lady in the gas station said the post office was just up here on Main Street. That’ll be our first stop.”

~

Five minutes later, Tick followed his dad through the frosted glass door of the post office, loosening his scarf, not sure what to expect. But he did have an odd sensation in his stomach, knowing the original mysterious letter from M.G. had been mailed from this very building. It was almost like seeing the hospital room where you’d been born, or a house your ancestor had built. Despite how he felt, this was where any investigation would have to begin—he just hoped it didn’t end here as well.

The place was boring, nothing but gray walls and gray floors and gray counters—the only thing breaking the monotony was a tiny faded Christmas tree in a corner with six or seven ornaments hanging from the sparse branches. No worker was in sight.

“Hello?” Dad called into the emptiness. A little bell sat on the main counter; he gave it a ring.

A few seconds later, an old man with bushy eyebrows and white stubble on his cheeks and chin appeared from the back, looking none too happy that he actually had to serve a customer. “What can I do for you?” he asked in a gruff voice before his feeble attempt at a smile.

“Uh, yes, we have a question for you.” Dad stumbled on his words, as if not sure of himself now that the investigation had officially begun. “We received a letter—postmarked from this town—in the middle of last month. In November. And, we’re, uh, trying to find the person who sent it to us, and, um, so here we are.” He rubbed his eyes with both hands and groaned. “Tick, your turn.”

“Oh. Yeah.” Tick pulled the original envelope from his journal, where he’d stuck it between two pages, then placed it on the counter. “Here it is. Does this look familiar to you at all, or the handwriting?”

The man leaned forward and for some reason sniffed the envelope. “Doesn’t mean a thing to me. Good day.” He turned and took a step toward the back of the office.

Tick felt his heart sinking toward his stomach. His dad gave him a worried look, then quickly said to the man, “Wait! Does anyone else work here? Could we speak to them?”

The old man turned and gave them an evil glare. “This is a small town, you hear me? I retired a long time ago, until I was forced to come back last month because one of the workers decided he was a psycho and up and quit. Good riddance. If you want to talk to him, be my guest.”

“What was his name?” Tick asked. “Where does he live?”

The formerly retired postal worker sighed. “Norbert Johnson. Lives north of here, the very last house on Main Street. Don’t tell him I sent you.”

The man left the room without another word or a good-bye.

~

They pulled up in their car at the dead end of Main Street, staring at a small house that seemed to huddle in the cold, miserable and heartbroken. Tick didn’t know if it officially approached haunted-house status, but it was close—two stories, broken shutters hanging on for dear life, peeling white paint. A couple of dim lights shone through the windows like dying fires. Two wilted trees, looking as though they hadn’t sprouted leaves in decades, stood like undernourished sentinels on either side of the short and broken driveway.

“Son,” his dad said, “maybe this time you should do the talking.”

“Dad, you’re supposed to be the grown-up in this group.”

“Well, that’s why I’ll provide the muscle and protect you from harm. You’re the brains of this outfit; you do the talking.” He winked at his son then climbed out of the car.

Tick grabbed his journal and followed him down the icy driveway, up the creaky wooden stairs of the snow-covered porch, then to the sad-looking front door, brown and sagging on its hinges. His dad knocked without hesitating.

A long moment passed with no answer or noise from inside. Tick shivered in the biting cold and rubbed his arms. His dad knocked again, then found a barely visible doorbell and pushed it, though it didn't work. Another half-minute went by without so much as a creak from the house.

Dad moaned. "Don't tell me we came all this way and the man we need to talk to is on vacation in sunny Florida."

Tick craned his neck to look at a window on the second floor. "There're lights on inside. Someone has to be home."

"I don't know—we always leave a light on when we go on vacation—scares the burglars away." He knocked again, half-heartedly. "Come on, let's go."



With slumped shoulders, they started down the porch steps. They were halfway down the sidewalk when they heard a scraping sound from behind and above them, then a low, tired voice. “What do you folks a-want?”

Tick turned to see a disheveled, gray-haired man peeking out of an upstairs

window, his eyes darting back and forth around the yard, looking for anything and everything.

“We’re trying to find Norbert Johnson,” Tick shouted up to the window. “We have some questions about a letter mailed from here.”

The man muttered something unintelligible before letting out a little shriek. “Do . . . do you work for Master George or Mistress Jane?”

Tick and his dad exchanged a baffled look. “Master George . . .” Dad said under his breath, then looked back up toward the man at the window. “Never heard of either one of them, but my son got a letter from someone named M.G. Could be the same person, I guess.”

The man paused, his squinty eyes scrutinizing the man and boy below him for signs of trouble. “Do you swear you’ve a-never heard of a woman named Mistress Jane in your life?”

“Never,” Tick and his dad said in unison.

“You’ve a-never seen or worked for a lady dressed all in yellow who’s as bald as Bigfoot is hairy?”

Tick couldn’t believe how weird this whole conversation had become. “Never.”

The man slammed his window shut without saying another word, leaving Tick to wonder if this Norbert guy really had gone bonkers like the old postal worker had suggested.

The front door popped open and Norbert stuck his head out, smoothing his thin gray hair. “Come on in,” he said in a quick, tight voice, looking around the yard again. “I’ve got something for you.”

~

Frazier had pulled to the side of the road two houses down from the one at the end of the street, curious as to what Tick and his dad would learn from the man who lived there. It seemed they merely wanted to discover if the postal workers knew who had mailed the letter they had received, but something about the whole thing seemed fishy.

With his spy equipment—conical sound trapper, thermo-magnetically heightened microphones, and molded earpieces—Frazier had heard every word exchanged in the post office and had found it quite interesting.

Norbert Johnson. The name didn’t ring a bell, but Mistress Jane certainly didn’t tell him about every person she came across in her travels. Maybe she’d interrogated Johnson about the whole affair. That would have been enough to drive any man crazy. The way Norbert had acted at his own house—all nervous and paranoid before finally letting the two strangers in—sure seemed to support the “crazy” theory.

Frazier picked up his eavesdropping gadget and pointed it at the house,

then reinserted his earpieces. It took a few seconds to pinpoint the murmurs of the conversation before he locked it in place as best he could, settling back to have a listen. The first thing he heard made his eyes widen. It was the voice of the man named Norbert.

“Here you go. The big lady told me it’s called the sixth clue.”

Bonding with Norbert

“Big lady?” Tick asked, holding the yellow envelope like his life depended on it. “Who gave this to you?”

They sat in a messy living room, not a single piece of furniture matching any of the others. *At least it’s warm*, Tick thought. He and his dad sat on a frumpy couch that leaned toward the middle, facing Norbert on his rickety old chair, where he wrung his hands and rocked back and forth.

“Big ol’ tall woman. Looked like ugly on a stick,” Norbert answered in almost a whisper. “Just about scared me out of my pants, what with her a-coming out of the old graveyard behind my house.”

The mention of a cemetery made Tick’s ears perk up. *It can’t be a coincidence . . .* It must be related somehow to the fourth clue and where he was supposed to go on May sixth.

“Did she say anything else to you?” Dad asked. “Talk to you at all?”

“Not much.” Norbert’s fidgeting made Tick’s head dizzy. “Told me some real smart kids would come a-looking for me, and I should give that there letter to ’em. Gave me several copies. Don’t know about you fellas, but when an eight-foot monster lady tells me to do something, I’m gonna pretty much do it. So there you go.”

Tick inserted his thumb under the flap and started ripping open the envelope as Norbert kept talking.

“Since that piece of parcel looked just like the ones from the British fella, and since I figured the British fella was an enemy of the Banana Lady, I reckoned I’d be a-doing a good task.”

Tick stopped just before pulling out the white cardstock of the sixth clue. “British? Who was British?”

His dad leaned forward, a surprisingly difficult task that made the pitiful couch groan like a captured wolverine. “Mr. Johnson, I’m more confused than the Easter Bunny at a Christmas party. Could you please tell us everything you know about the letter we got from Alaska and who sent it? Maybe start from the beginning?”

“The Easter Bunny at a—” Tick began, a questioning smirk on his face.

“Quiet, son.”

Norbert finally settled back in his chair and began his story, seemingly relieved that he’d been given direction on how to go about this conversation.

Though Tick desperately wanted to read the next clue, he slipped it inside his journal and listened to the strange man from Alaska.

“I’d worked there at the post office in Macadamia for twenty-plus years, and I was just as happy as can be. Well, as happy as a single man in his fifties who smells a little like boiled cabbage can be.” Tick involuntarily sniffed at this point, then tried to cover it up by scratching his nose. Norbert continued without noticing.

“Then *they* had to come along and ruin my life. It was a cold day in November—of course, every day is cold in November when you live up here, if you know what I mean. Anyway, first this busy little British gent named Master George, dressed all fancy-like, comes walking into my shop holding a box of letters that looked just like the one I gave you.” He pointed at the journal in Tick’s lap. “Goes off about how they need to get out right away, do-da, do-da.”

Tick decided that last part was Norbert’s way of saying “etcetera” and held in a laugh.

“I assured the fella I’d take care of it and he left. Wasn’t a half-hour later when the scariest woman I’ve ever laid eyes upon came a-stomping in, dressed from head to toe in nothing but yellow. And she was bald—not a hair on her noggin to be found. Called herself Mistress Jane, and she was mean. I’m telling you, *mean*. You could feel it coming off her in waves.” Norbert shivered.

“What did she want?” Dad asked.

“She was a-looking for Master George, which told me right away that the British gent must be a good guy, because Lemony Jane surely wasn’t.”

Tick felt like the final mystery of a great book had been revealed to him. The source of the letters suddenly had a name, a description. He was no longer a couple of initials and a blurred image. M.G. had become Master George. From England. And he was the good guy.

“She threatened me,” Norbert continued. “She was cruel. And I couldn’t get her out of my mind. Still can’t. She’s been in my dreams ever since, telling me she’s gonna find out I lied to her.”

“Lied to her?” Dad repeated.

“Yes, sir. Told her I’d never met anybody named Master George, and I hid the letters under the counter before she could see them. Flat out lied to her, and she told me bad things would happen if she ever found I’d a-done it. And done it, I did.”

“So . . .” Tick started, “you quit your job because you were scared of her?”

Norbert looked down at his feet as if ashamed of himself. “You got me all figured out, boy. Poor Norbert Johnson hasn’t been the same since the day I met that golden devil. Quit my job, went on welfare, borrowed money. I been

hiding in this house ever since. Only reason I met the tall lady who gave me the letters is because I heard a noise out in the backyard.”

“I thought you said she came out of a graveyard,” Dad said.

“She did. Like I said, back behind my house is an old, old cemetery. Got too old, I reckon, so they built another one closer to downtown.”

“Mothball,” Tick said quietly.

“Huh?” Norbert replied.

“Her name is Mothball. The lady who gave you this letter.” Tick slipped it from his journal and held it in his hand.

Norbert looked perplexed. “Well what in the Sears-and-Roebuck kind of name is that?”

“She said her dad was in a hurry when he named her, something about soldiers trying to kidnap them.”

Norbert did nothing but blink.

“Never mind.” Tick turned to his dad. “Why in the world would she have given *him* the sixth clue?”

His dad furrowed his brow for a moment, deep in thought. “Well, maybe it’s like I said—I think they wanted us to be proactive and seek out information, not just wait around to find it. Maybe they went back to all the towns they mailed the letters from and gave copies of the clues to the postal workers who would cooperate. They knew if we did some investigating, going to the source would be the most logical step.”

Tick thought for a second. “Dad, I think you nailed it.”

“I’m brilliant, my son. Brilliant.” He winked.

Norbert cleared his throat. “Excuse me for interrupting, folks, but what in the name of Kermit the Frog are you guys a-talking about? You came here asking me questions, but it sounds like you know a lot more than I do.”

Dad leaned over and patted Tick on the shoulder. “My boy here, the one who’s receiving these letters, is trying to figure out the big mystery behind them. We think it was a test of sorts to see if we’d seek you out, which is why you were given the sixth clue to give to us.”

Norbert nodded. “Ah. I see.” He rolled his eyes and shrugged his shoulders.

“Look,” Tick said. “Do you know anything else about Master George, Mistress Jane, Mothball, anything?”

Norbert shook his head in response.

“Well, then,” Tick said. “I think we’ve got what we came for. Dad, maybe we should get going. I can read the clue while you drive.” Tick tried his best to hint that he didn’t feel very comfortable in Norbert’s house.

“Just a minute.” His dad looked at their host. “Mr. Johnson, you’ve done a

great service for us and we'd like to return the favor. Is there, uh, anything we can do to help you, uh, get your nerve back and go back to work?"

Norbert didn't reply for a long time. Then, "I don't know. It's awfully kind of you to offer. I guess I'm just too scared that woman is gonna come back for me and string me up like a fresh catch of salmon."

"Well, let me tell you what I think," Dad said, holding up a finger. "I agree with you one hundred percent. I think this Mistress Jane person must be evil, because we wholeheartedly believe what M.G.—Master George—is doing must be a noble cause because he wants my son's help. And we've committed to that cause heart and soul, as you can tell."

"I reckon I can see that. What's your point?"

"Well, if this . . . yellow-dressed, bald, nasty woman made you quit your job, shun society, and hole up in a house all by yourself, then I think she's won a mighty victory over the world. She's beaten the great Norbert Johnson once and for all, and will move on to her next prey."

Tick liked seeing his dad try and help this poor man and decided to do his part. "Yeah, Norbert, you're doing exactly what she wanted you to do—give up and be miserable. Go back to work, show her you're the boss of your own life."

Norbert looked back and forth between Tick and his dad, his face a mask of uncertainty. "And if she does come back? What then?"

"Then by golly," Dad said, "stand up to her. Show her who's in charge."

"And call us," Tick chimed in. "By then, maybe we'll have figured everything out and know how to help you."

Norbert scratched his head. "Well, I don't know. I'm a-gonna have to think about this."

Dad smiled. "Listen, we'll exchange phone numbers and keep in touch, okay? How's that sound?"

Norbert didn't answer for a very long time, and Tick wondered if something was wrong. But then he saw moisture rimming on the bottom of the man's eyes and realized the guy was all choked up.

Finally, their new friend spoke. "I can't tell you how much it means to me that you folks care enough to give me your phone number. I just wished you a-lived up here in Alaska. I could use a friend."

"Well, hey," Dad said. "In this world, with the Internet and all that, we can keep in touch just fine."

And with that, their new friendship was sealed and Tick felt mighty proud of himself.

Frazier watched as Tick and his dad stepped out of the house, then shook hands and embraced their new little buddy. They said a few more sappy words, just like they had inside, and headed for their vehicle.

What is this, a soap opera? I might need a tissue for my weepy eyes.

He snickered at his own joke, then put the car into drive, ready to follow, the twilight of midday having long faded into the full darkness of late afternoon.

Frazier pulled out his half of the special device, fingered the big button in the middle of its shiny gray surface.

In just a few minutes, he thought. Just a few minutes and the show begins.

Pedal to the Metal

Norbert stared out his frosty window, watching the boy Tick and his father climb into their rental car, warm it up, then begin their long trek back to Anchorage. Norbert hadn't felt this good in weeks, like he was doing something *right*, finally taking a stand against the yellow witch who haunted his dreams. He couldn't explain it—the boy and his dad seemed to pulse with some invisible force, strong and magnetic. Norbert felt like a new person, as if powerful batteries had replaced his old junky ones, revved him up to face the world like he'd never done before.

The new year could bring a new life. He'd go back to work . . .

His thoughts petered out when he noticed another car pull out into the road just moments after Edgar had driven past it. The black Honda had been parked on the sidewalk, idling, and wasn't in front of a house, just a blank lot of snow-covered weeds and brush. Something about that didn't seem right. Not at all.

Then it hit Norbert.

The person in the black car was *following* his new friends. That couldn't be a good thing. *No sir, that couldn't be good one bit.*

The new Norbert acted before the old Norbert could talk himself out of it. He threw on some warm clothes, a wool cap, and his faded, weather-beaten shoes. He frantically searched for his keys, forgetting where he'd put them since his last venture to town. They weren't on his dresser, weren't on his kitchen counter—he couldn't find them anywhere. After five minutes of hunting, he was just about to give up when he saw them on the floor under the table; he grabbed them and turned toward the garage.

The doorbell rang, freezing his blood solid.

Trying to stay brave, he ran up the stairs to his usual spying window and took a peek. Relieved, he saw it was just a kid girl with a man who looked an awful lot like Master George—dressed in a fancy suit, shiny shoes, the works. But this guy stood a lot taller and had plenty of hair, shiny blond hair slicked back against his skull.

Must be another one of those smart kids looking for their letter.

He bolted back down the stairs, grabbed another copy of Mothball's golden envelopes (could that *really* be her name?) and tore open the door. He held out the letter and was just about to drop it into the girl's hand and close

the door when he caught a glimpse of his visitor's car parked in the driveway. It was much nicer and . . . faster than his. An idea popped in his head.

"You folks lookin' for a clue from M.G.?" he asked.

The befuddled (Norbert's new favorite word) strangers nodded in unison.

"Someone's in a whole lot of trouble—friends of Mothball," he said, then shook the envelope in front of them. "This is the sixth clue. If you want it, you've gotta help me save them."

~

Driving slowly down Main Street, with a full tank of gas in the car, Edgar settled his bones for the long drive back to Aunt Mabel's. He looked over at Tick, who was just pulling the sixth clue from its envelope.

"Read it, boy!" he shouted cheerfully. "I can hardly wait. What a trip, huh? What a trip!" He felt so good they'd accomplished something—not just getting the next clue, but perhaps helping poor Norbert get his life back together. Though he'd dared not admit it, Edgar had been scared to death their trip to Alaska would prove a waste, thereby nullifying his value to Tick, who'd had the courage to tell him about everything.

Tick put the white piece of cardstock down in his lap. "Nah, let's just wait 'til we get back to Washington. What's the rush?" Tick let out a fake yawn and stretched.

"Professor, these windows *do* roll down, and I *am* strong enough to throw you out of one."

"Okay, okay, if you insist." Tick read the words out loud, holding the paper up so Edgar could glance at it and follow along as he drove.

Recite the magic words at exactly seventeen minutes past the quarter hour following the six-hour mark before midnight plus one hundred and sixty-six minutes minus seven quarter-hours plus a minute times seven, rounded to the nearest half-hour plus three. Neither a second before nor three seconds after.

(Yes, I'm fully aware it will take you a second or two to say the magic words, but I'm talking about the precise time you begin to say it. Quit being so snooty.)

"Oh, boy," Edgar said. "Can't say my head's in the mood to figure that one out. Glad it's your problem."

Tick laid the clue down onto his lap, already scrutinizing its every word. "I'll have it figured out by the time we stop for you to use the bathroom and buy more Doritos." He opened up his journal and started jotting down thoughts and calculations from the clue.

“Very funny,” Edgar replied, elbowing his son. “You know, I was so worried about that ‘death’ e-mail you got, but now I’m feeling pretty fat and happy.”

“Better than skinny and sad, I guess,” Tick said.

Edgar laughed. *What a great kid I have*, he thought. *What a great kid.*

~

Frazier waited until he and his prey were well out of town, cruising down the long and straight two-lane highway that headed back to Anchorage. He hated how short the days were this far north. It wouldn’t be as fun to watch the coming mayhem in the darkness. He looked in his rearview mirror and saw some lights in the distance, but they seemed too far back for him to be worried. Once he engaged the device, it wouldn’t take long to have his fun and be done with it.

He gripped the Chu controller in his palm, put the tip of his thumb on the button.

Then he pushed it.

~

Tick stared ahead at the long blank road, lost in thought about the sixth clue. The headlights revealed nothing but cracked asphalt and dirty piles of plowed ice, swallowed up in darkness on both sides. *There must not be a moon out*, he thought. Even the snow seemed black tonight.

“Uh-oh,” his dad said in a worried whisper.

Tick looked over and saw the tight cowl of panic on his dad’s face. He felt something shudder in his chest. “What?”

His dad had both hands gripped tightly on the steering wheel, trying to squeeze the inner lining out of it. “The wheel’s frozen!” His legs moved up and down, alternately pumping the gas and brakes as the frightening, plastic-springy sound of the pedal filled the car.

“Dad, what’s wrong?”

His dad kept yanking on the wheel, pushing on the brakes. “It’s not responding—it’s not doing anything. I can’t *do* anything!”

“What do you—”

“Son, the car’s out of control—it won’t let me . . .” His voice faded as he tried everything again, his look of disbelief overcoming the panic. “What in the . . .”

Tick could only watch, bile building in his throat and stomach. Something was horribly wrong, and it had to have something to do with their new enemies. “You can’t get it to stop?”

Dad looked over at him, exasperated. “Son, I can’t do *anything!*”

In unison, they looked forward. The road remained straight for as far as they could see, but it ended in blackness. Anything could be hiding in the darkness, waiting for an out-of-control car to smash into it.

“The steering wheel won’t move?” Tick asked, knowing the answer anyway.

His dad unsnapped his seatbelt, squirming in his chair to turn around.

“What are you doing?” Tick yelled.

Dad reached over and unbuckled Tick’s belt as well. “Someone’s got to us, kid. We’ve gotta get out of here.”

~

From the backseat, Norbert stared at the two cars in front of him as they gained ground, knowing deep inside that something terrible was happening. He sensed frantic movement in Tick’s car—dark shadows bobbing and jerking around—and saw the calm demeanor of the person sitting in the one following them, barely revealed by the headlights of the car in which Norbert sat. They were almost on the stranger.

“It’s now or never,” Norbert said, then tapped the shoulder of the man driving. “Put the pedal to the metal, pal.”

“Do whatever he says,” the girl said to the driver like she was his mother.

~

Frazier laughed as he saw the man and the boy squirming inside their car, desperate for a way out of this little predicament. He looked down at his controller, trying to find the dial that would make the car ahead go even faster. He finally found it and turned it up just a little, loving every minute of this game.

When he finally glanced back up to the road, he yelped as a car zoomed past him on the left, then swerved to the right to cut him off. Overreacting, Frazier slammed on his brakes and twisted the steering wheel, shooting off the road with a horrible squeal of brakes before slamming into a massive snowbank.

His airbag exploded open, scorching his forearms and catapulting the Chu device into the backseat.

~

Tick felt like a sailor going down with a submarine. The front doors wouldn’t open; some kind of permanent locking mechanism kept them sealed.

“What could possibly be doing this?” Dad yelled, struggling to lean his

huge girth over the back of the seat to check the rear doors. From the click of the handle being yanked and released, Tick knew they were locked, too. His dad groaned as he dropped back into the driver's seat.

The car had inexplicably sped up just a few moments earlier, rocketing them faster and faster toward the unknown. The car remained on a straight path for now—the steep piles of snow on the roadside nudging the wheels back onto the road if they began to stray—but it couldn't last much longer. Tick knew if they hit a turn, they'd be in a whole heap of trouble.

Tick felt a block of ice in the pit of his stomach; they probably had only a minute or two before they'd crash. "We need to break a window!" he yelled.

"Right!" Dad replied. "Plant your back on the seat and kick the windshield with both feet on my signal, okay?"

Desperation swept away Tick's fear, clearing his mind. "Okay," he said as he got into position, tucking his journal down the seat of his pants as far as it would go.

When they were both ready, feet stuck up above them, coiled for the kick, Edgar grabbed Tick's hand. "On three—one . . . two . . . three!"

With synchronized screams, they both kicked the windshield with all their might.

It didn't budge.

~

Screaming his frustration into the frigid air, a plume of frozen vapor shooting from his mouth, Frazier Gunn tried to open the buckled back door. When it stubbornly refused, he leaned over to look through the window, searching for the Chu controller. He couldn't see a thing.

How could this have all fallen apart? How?

He shot a quick glance down the road to see the fading red glow of two cars' taillights. The device would be out of range in a matter of seconds and once that happened, he'd have no more power over the car's operations. It would continue to drive like a maniacal machine until it ran out of gas or smashed into something.

Of course, without being able to turn, the latter is *exactly* what would happen. Crash, boom, bang. The thought made him pause, then smile. Chances were, he'd still complete his task, one way or the other. Mistress Jane didn't need to know all the details.

Not caring anymore about the controller or his banged up car, Frazier turned and headed back toward town.

He needed to find a cemetery.

~

On Tick and his dad's fifth synchronized kick, a huge crack shot across the wide glass with the sound of breaking glaciers. Tick's heart leapt to his throat and the next kick seemed to have twice the power from his adrenaline rush. Several more cracks splintered through the windshield like an icy spider web. Tick was crouched too far down in the seat to see up ahead, but his mind assured him they were probably shooting toward a bend in the road with brutal speed. One way or another, it would all be over very soon.

"One more ought to do it!" his dad yelled, gasping in breaths. "One . . . two . . . THREE!"

Tick kicked with both legs again, and almost slipped to the floor of the car when his feet kept going, crashing through the windshield with the horrible clinking and crackling sound of shattered glass. Several tiny shards flew back into the car from the onrushing wind, but the bulk of the windshield, held together by a strong film of clear plastic, flew up into the air and tumbled away behind them.

"Come on!" Dad yelled, helping Tick back into a sitting position.

The air ripped at their hair and clothes, so cold that Tick's skin felt like frozen rubber. Squinting his eyes, he saw a big turn in the road a couple of miles directly ahead. He couldn't tell what waited there, be it a cliff or a field or a towering barn; he saw only darkness, a wall of black tar.

"We've gotta hurry!" his dad screamed over the wind. "Together now, come on!"

Summoning every last trace of courage left in his body, Tick followed his dad over the dashboard and through the gaping, wind-pummeled hole that led to the hood of the car.

~

"There they are!" Norbert screamed, his voice squeaky with panic. "Pull up there, right to the front! If those guys jump, they're dead!"

"Hurry!" the girl yelled.

The blond, fancy-dressed driver obeyed without a word, gunning the engine until their vehicle pulled even with the out-of-control car. Just a few feet away, to Norbert's right, Tick and his dad had climbed halfway onto the hood of the car, the wind trying to rip them to pieces.

"Okay, get as close as you can," Norbert said, rolling down the window. "I wanna see every scratch on that there paint job!"

Once again, like a soldier following orders, the driver did as he was told.

~

Tick couldn't believe his eyes. Out of nowhere, a car had appeared to their left, just a few feet away. His first thought was that whoever had caused this

whole mess had pulled up to finish them off. But then the backseat window rolled down, and his heart lifted when he saw the ridiculous face of Norbert Johnson, who was somehow smiling and yelling and crying at the same time.

“Norbert’s come to save you!” he screamed over the howling, rushing wind. “I’ll pull you through the window!”

Tick’s dad immediately scooted back into the car to gain solid footing, then grabbed Tick by both arms, yanking him over to his side and toward Norbert’s open window. “You first!” he yelled.

With no time to lose, Tick carefully inched across the hood, gripping the metal with the tips of his icy cold fingers, his dad helping him along with a firm hold. The other car was literally a foot away from theirs, running side by side like insane drag racers. Before Tick knew it, Norbert had reached out and grabbed him, pulling him through the window and into his car. He groaned and grunted as he rolled past Norbert and fell onto the floor of the backseat, suddenly safe and warm, feeling the sharp corners of his journal poking him in his side.

He scrambled up and onto the seat, looking toward his dad with a sudden burst of terror. His dad had half-crawled onto the hood, gripping the edge of the door bar with one arm and reaching out for Norbert with the other. The look on his dad’s face made Tick hurt inside. He had never seen anything close to the fear and panic and sheer horror that now masked his favorite person’s normally cheerful and bright demeanor. The man looked as terrified as any kid would be, and it scared Tick.

“Get my dad!” he cried. “Please save my dad!”

But Norbert didn’t need any further instruction. He was on his knees, leaning out the window, grabbing at the large man with both hands. Tick knew his dad had to weigh three times what he did, and it wouldn’t be easy to pull him off the other car and into this one. Not able to breathe, he looked ahead.

The road curved sharply to the right, just a hundred feet from where they were.

“Hurry!” he yelled.

Norbert suddenly jerked back into the car, his arms gripped tightly, pulling on Tick’s dad as best he could. Tick watched as his dad’s hands, then arms, then head, then shoulders squeezed through the open window, Norbert screaming with the effort.

“I’m stuck!” Dad yelled. “My big fat tubby body is stuck!”

“No!” Tick yelled. He reached forward and grabbed his dad’s shirt, yanking and pulling as hard as he could. “You can do it, Dad. Suck in your breath!”

“Son, I . . . can’t, I’m stuck!”

Norbert and Tick kept working, gripping and regripping, heaving and reheaving. Though he couldn't bear to look, Tick knew they only had precious seconds left until it was all over.

"Pull away from the other car and slow down!" Norbert yelled to the driver. "Don't you worry, Mr. Higginbottom. We won't let go of you. Keep your feet up!"

The driver veered to the left as he slowly applied the brakes, though it seemed like the worst roller coaster ride in history to Tick. His dad would be roadkill if he slipped out of the window.

"Don't let go of Big Bear," Dad whispered to Tick, actually breaking a smile. "Please, don't let go of me."

Tick couldn't talk, he just squeezed his grip even tighter.

Just as the car slowed to a snail's pace, they heard a horrendous screeching and metallic crunch as the other car slammed into something they couldn't see. A bright flash lit the night around them as a terrible explosion rocked the air.

Even when they finally came to a complete standstill, and cheers erupted from everyone, including his dad, Tick couldn't let go. He scrambled around Norbert and hugged his dad's arms and shoulders and head like he hadn't seen him in ten years, bursting into tears. After a very long moment, his dad finally spoke up.

"Professor, do you think you could give me a push now? I'm, uh, kind of stuck."

~

The Girl with Black Hair

Frazier stood in the snow-swept graveyard, shivering and rubbing his hands together as he waited for Mistress Jane to wink him back to the Thirteenth Reality. He'd sent the nanolocator signal several minutes ago, but she often took her time about these things. She always wanted to make sure people knew the Mistress was in charge; she helped others at *her* convenience, not theirs.

A crunch in the snow behind him made Frazier spin around to see who had intruded on his waiting ground. He almost lost his lunch when he saw what stood there.

Where did she come from? She must be—

He didn't have time to finish his thought before the gigantic woman covered his nose and mouth with a foul-smelling piece of cloth, gripping it in place with her huge hand.

As he faded into blackness, he couldn't help but wonder if Mistress Jane would even miss him.

~

Tick, his journal now clasped in his right hand, stared in disbelief at what could've been his death.

Next to him, his dad shook his head, arms folded as he stared down into the gully. "Boy, I'm sure glad I paid ten bucks for insurance. The rental company can pay for that mess."

They stood with Norbert on the side of the road, watching the licking flames as the once out-of-control car burned. When it ran off the road, the car had shot off a steep embankment and crashed into a rocky ditch, crumpling into a mass of metal and broken glass, consumed by gasoline fire.

Despite the cold, Tick was still sweating from the intensity of their last-second escape. As soon as their rescue car had come to a stop and they'd managed to dislodge his dad, they'd run to this spot, unable to believe that if Norbert had shown up only a few seconds later, Tick and his dad might be buried somewhere in the wreckage below.

"Norbert, I don't know how we can ever—" Dad said.

The postal worker waved his hand like swatting at flies. "Not another word, Mr. Higginbottom, not another word. I just a-did what any good

upstanding citizen would've done in the circumstances. You folks made me feel like myself again. That's thanks enough."

Tick finally broke his stare from the burning car and looked at Norbert. "How did you know we needed help? And who are those people in the car back there?" The driver and his daughter had not gotten out yet, probably still in shock over what they'd just seen. "Why would they want to save us?"

Norbert smiled, a barely noticeable crack in his still-panicked face. "Those are some good questions you're a-spouting out, boy, good questions indeed. I reckon they're in the same boat as you and your daddy, here. Back at the house, I'd just noticed a suspicious car pull onto the road to follow you folks when this fancy man and his little girl showed up, a-looking for the same stuff as you. Let's go talk to them." He gestured to the destroyed car. "Gazing down there won't fix a thing. What's done is done. Come on."

They walked back to the car and to the people who had saved their lives. The driver's side door popped open when they were still a few feet away; a tall, nicely dressed man stepped out, smoothing his greased blond hair back as he did so.

He bowed slightly as they approached, closing his eyes for a long second. "Good evening, sirs." His accent was thick, maybe German. "I apologize that we have not formally made acquaintance—if you'll excuse me."

Tick's dad had moved forward to shake the man's hand, but stepped back in surprise as the stranger hurriedly walked around the car and opened the passenger-side door, bowing in deference to the person inside. Baffled, Tick stared as a girl about his age got out of the car and waved at them. Even though they'd been a couple of feet apart during the few crazy seconds it took to save his dad, Tick had not gotten a good look at the girl until now, thanks to the car's headlights that were still shining brightly in the darkness.

She had an olive complexion and long dark hair framing her brown eyes and thin face. She was maybe an inch or two shorter than Tick and wore clothes that seemed like nothing special—he'd almost expected a princess the way her blond companion acted toward her.

"Hi there," she said, her gaze focused on Tick.

She also had an accent, but very subtle. "Hi," he answered. "Uh, thanks for saving us—to you and your . . . dad."

The girl laughed. "Oh, he's not my dad. He's my butler."

The man jerked his head stiffly in another bow. "It is a pleasure. My name is Fruppenschneiger, but you may call me Frupey."

It took every ounce of willpower for Tick not to laugh. *Frupey?*

His dad lumbered forward, his legs obviously sore from the car ordeal, and vigorously shook the hands of Frupey and the girl. "Thank you, thank you so much. I still can't believe how all this happened. Thank you for saving us."

Frupey answered in his formal voice. “It was our pleasure, so that Miss Pacini may receive the sixth clue.”

Tick felt his stomach lift off from its normal position and lodge itself in his throat. “What?” he croaked. “Did you just say . . .” He looked at the dark-haired girl, who was smiling like she’d just been crowned Miss Universe.

“Hello, Americanese Boy,” she said, holding her hand out. “It’s about time we finally met face to face, huh?”

Tick couldn’t believe it.

Sofia.

Time Constraints

It took only a few seconds for Tick and Sofia to break past the thin wall of awkwardness; they did, after all, know each other very well from their e-mail exchanges. They sat in the back of the car and talked nonstop during the drive back to Norbert's home. Tick's dad squeezed in the backseat next to them, butting in every now and then to ask a question or two.

Sofia had never given Tick a hint in her e-mails that she was from a wealthy family, and nothing about her screamed it out, either. She said she'd planned all along to surprise Tick in Alaska, figuring she might as well go along, too. The cost of the trip was no problem for her family, and as long as Frupey the Butler went with her, Sofia's parents pretty much let her do whatever she wanted.

"So how in the world did you get so rich?" Tick asked when they reached the town.

"My ancestors invented spaghetti."

Tick laughed, but cut it short when Sofia looked at him with a stone-dead face. "Wait . . . you're serious?"

Sofia finally let out a chuckle and slapped Tick on the shoulder. Hard. "No, but I got you good, didn't I? Actually, my grandfather would say his father *did* invent it, or at least made it perfect. Ever heard of Pacini Spaghetti?"

"Uh . . . no. Sorry."

Sofia huffed. "Americans. All you eat are hamburgers and French fries." She pinched all five fingers of her right hand together in a single point, shaking it with each word; it was just like something Tick had seen once in a mafia movie about an Italian mob boss. Sofia even made a small "uh" sound after her words sometimes, like "and-uh" and "French-uh."

"Hey, I eat spaghetti all the time," Tick argued. "With authentic Ragu Sauce."

"Authentic . . ." Sofia pursed her lips. "Then I guess you've *also* never heard of Pacini Sauce. What is this . . . Rag-oo? It sounds like some kind of disease."

"It tastes pretty good, but, I tell you what," Tick said, "you send me some of your stuff and I'll try it."

"Frupey!" she barked at her butler, driving the car.

"Yes, Miss Pacini?" he said, looking into the rearview mirror.

“Please send three cases of our noodles and sauce to these poor Americans.”

“I’ll do it the second we return, Miss.”

“Thank you.” She looked back at Tick. “He’s such a good butler. You really should get one.”

“Yeah, right,” Tick said, sharing a laugh with his dad. “The only thing my family’s invented is Edgar Stew, and trust me,”—he lowered his voice into a pretend whisper—“it wouldn’t sell.”

“At least your mom’s a good cook,” his dad chimed in, ignoring Tick’s insult. “I bet we could get rich off her if we knew how.”

“What,” Sofia teased, “does she make a good hamburger and French fry?”

“Do you really think that’s all we eat?” Tick asked.

“Oh, sorry, I forgot. She makes a good hot dog, too?”

Even as they laughed, Tick couldn’t get over the craziness of it all. Here he was, joking around with a girl from Italy in the back of a butler-driven car, in the state of Alaska, having just escaped from a runaway Oldsmobile.

His life had certainly changed forever.

~

Once they got back to Norbert’s, Tick’s dad called Aunt Mabel and told her they wouldn’t be back until the next day, then he called the police and began the long process of dealing with the car accident. Frupey and Norbert scrounged around in the kitchen, trying to find food for everyone. *Car chases evidently make people hungry*, Tick thought as his own stomach rumbled.

Tick and Sofia sat together on the pitiful couch in the front room, discussing the latest clue they’d received. They had to use Sofia’s copy because Tick’s bit the bullet along with the rental car—he’d failed to slip it back into his journal during the frantic rush of excitement. The only light in the room came from a junky old lamp without a shade, its bare light bulb blinding if you looked at it directly.

“Well, it’s obviously just like the first clue,” Tick said as Sofia scanned the words again. “Except this one tells us the time instead of the day.”

“You Americans are so smart,” she replied. “How did you ever figure *that* out?”

“Man, you sure are smart-alecky for a rich Italian girl.”

“*Girl?*” she asked, her eyes narrowing. “Do I look like a little baby doll to you?”

Tick laughed. “I never would’ve guessed you’d actually be *scarier* in real life than in the e-mail.”

Sofia elbowed him hard in the stomach. “Just remember what I told you—I

beat up seventeen boys last summer. No one messes with a Pacini.”

“It’s okay, I don’t usually go around picking fights with gi—, I mean . . . young women . . . who own spaghetti companies.”

“That’s better, Americanese Boy. Now let’s figure this out, huh?”

“Sounds good, Italian . . . ese . . . Woman.” Tick didn’t understand why she could call him *boy*, but he couldn’t call her *girl*. He wanted to laugh again—for some odd reason, he felt really comfortable around her—but he didn’t particularly want another jab to the stomach. He took the sixth clue from her instead and read through it again while she stared into space for a minute, thinking.

Recite the magic words at exactly seventeen minutes past the quarter hour following the six-hour mark before midnight plus one hundred and sixty-six minutes minus seven quarter-hours plus a minute times seven, rounded to the nearest half-hour plus three. Neither a second before nor three seconds after.

(Yes, I’m fully aware it will take you a second or two to say the magic words, but I’m talking about the precise time you begin to say it. Quit being so snooty.)

Once again, M.G.’s sense of humor leaked through the message, and Tick found himself eager to meet the man Norbert had already met. At least now they knew his real name.

Master George. *Sounds like something from Star Wars.*

“How long did it take you to figure out the first clue?” Tick asked.

“How long it take you?” Sofia responded. Every once in a while, she messed up her English, but for the most part, she knew it perfectly.

“Once I sat down to do it, maybe an hour.”

“Then it took me *half* an hour.”

“Yeah, right.”

Sofia gave him an evil grin and raised her eyebrows. “Should we race on this one? Like a . . . Master George Olympics.”

Tick had assumed they’d work together to solve it, but her idea suddenly sounded very fun. *If I was a nerd before, I’ve hit rock-bottom geek stature by now*, he thought.

“You’re on,” he said, ready for the challenge.

“I’m on what?” she asked. “Speak English, please.”

Tick rolled his eyes. “Here, we’ll put the clue on this little coffee table, where we can both see it, okay? Neither one of us are allowed to touch it. I’ll run and get some paper and a pencil from Norbert so you can have something

to write on.” He stood up.

“What about you?” she asked.

Tick held his journal out. “I’ll write in this—why didn’t you bring yours?”

Sofia shrugged. “I got tired of carrying it around. Who needs it?” She tapped her head with a finger. “It’s all stored up here anyway. So, what about a prize? What does the winner get?”

“Hmm, good question.” Tick scratched his neck, faltering when he realized he wasn’t wearing his scarf—he must’ve lost it in the wind after they busted the windshield.

“What’s wrong?” Sofia asked.

“Huh? Oh, nothing.” He paused. His scarf was gone, and Sofia hadn’t said a thing about his birthmark—maybe he could actually survive without . . . no. He had an extra one at home, and deep down, Tick knew it would be around his neck when he returned to school.

“Tick,” Sofia said, staring up at him, “did your brain freeze?”

“No, no . . . it’s just . . . never mind.” He snapped his fingers. “I’ve got it—the winner gets to visit the house of the loser next summer. But, uh, you have to pay for it either way because you’re rich.”

“Wow, what a deal.”

“I’ll be back in a sec with the stuff.”

A couple of minutes later, pencils in hand, the race began.

~

Just as he’d done with the first clue, Tick jotted down the phrases from the sixth clue that seemed to go together logically. Once he’d done that, he assigned letters to them to indicate the order they should be calculated. It seemed easy now that he’d gone through the process before.

The biggest problem was determining which midnight the clue referred to—the one that *began* the day of May sixth or the one at the end of it? Then he realized whatever time he ended up with probably wouldn’t *be* midnight, so it really didn’t matter.

He nervously glanced over at Sofia, who was doing a lot more thinking than writing, tapping her pencil against her forehead, staring at the clue.

I’m way ahead of her, he thought, then continued his scribbles.

A couple of minutes later, the page in his journal looked like this:

Beginning Time: Midnight.

A. six-hour mark before midnight = 6:00 p.m.

B. quarter hour following A = 6:15 p.m.

- C. seventeen minutes past B = 6:32 p.m.
- D. C plus 166 minutes = 9:18 p.m.
- E. D minus 7 quarter hours = 7:33 p.m.
- F. E plus a minute times 7 = 7:40 p.m.
- G. F rounded to nearest half-hour = 7:30 p.m.
- H. –G plus three half-hours = 9:00 p.m. on May 6

“Bingo!” he yelled, turning to say his time out loud. His words died somewhere in his throat when he saw Sofia looking at him with a smirk, holding up her paper with the answer scrawled across it:

9:00 p.m.

“Dang,” Tick muttered. “But you didn’t even take notes or anything!”
 “I’ve got brains—I don’t need notes.”

Tick folded his arms. “I take it back—you’re not a woman. You’re a *girl*. And I hate spaghetti.”

“I believe Americans call this a . . . sore loser, right?”

“Something like that.”

Sofia put her hands behind her head and looked up at the ceiling, letting out a big sigh, relishing her win. “I can’t wait to visit your little house in Washington. Will your mother make me a hot dog?”

Tick snapped up the sixth clue from the table and stood up. “If you’re lucky. And what makes you think our house is *little*, rich girl?”

Sofia lowered her arms to her lap and eyed Tick up and down. “I looked at your clothes and I said to myself, he must live in a little house.” She winked, then punched Tick in the leg, hard.

“Ow!” he yelled, rubbing the spot. “What’s that for?”

“To let you know I’m kidding.”

Tick shook his head. “You are one weird kid.”

“Ah, yes. That’s the kettle calling the papa black.”

Tick burst out laughing, falling back on the couch holding his stomach.

“What’s so funny?”

“Well, for one thing, you said it backwards. And it’s *pot*, not *papa*.”

“Whatever. When I come to visit you, I will teach you Italian so we can talk like intelligent people.”

“I think spaghetti is just about the only Italian word I need to know, thank you very much. That, and pizza.”

Sofia tried to punch him again, but this time Tick was too fast; he jumped up and ran out of the room, the sounds of pursuit close behind. Luckily, dinner was ready in the kitchen—ramen noodles and peanut butter sandwiches.

~

The next day, Tick's heart hurt when he had to say good-bye to Norbert, then Frupey and Sofia after they dropped him and his dad off at a car rental agency—the rich girl and her butler had a flight to catch. In just one day, they'd become like close family, and he hated to think he may never see them again. At least he knew he could expect an e-mail from Sofia, and he hoped she really would come visit him next summer.

Of course, by then, the magic day would have come and gone, and who knew what might change after that.

After another couple of fun-filled days being pampered by Aunt Mabel and having his life mapped out for him in detail, Tick and his dad headed back to Washington.

Once there, Tick began the longest three months of his life.

Part 3

The Magic Words

April Fool

Tick stared at his own reflection in the dark puddle of grimy water only inches away from his face, dismayed at how pitiful he looked. Like a scaredy-cat kid, eyes full of fear. Both ends of his scarf hung down, the flattened tips floating on the nasty sludge like dead fish. He winced when Billy “The Goat” Cooper yanked his arm behind him again, ratcheting it another notch higher along his back until the pain was almost unbearable.

Tick refused to say a word.

“Come on, Barf Scarf Man,” the Goat growled, digging his knee into Tick’s spine, wedging it below his twisted arm. “All you have to say is, ‘Happy April Fool’s Day. Please get me wet.’ You can do it, you’re a big boy.”

Tick remained silent, despite the pain, despite the mounting humiliation as more school kids gathered around the scene. A few months ago, he would’ve given in and said the words, done as the Goat commanded. He would’ve let it end quickly and moved on. But not now. Never again.

Billy pushed Tick’s face into the water, holding it there for several seconds. Tick remained calm, knowing he could hold his breath much longer than the Goat would dare keep him down. When he finally removed his hand from the back of Tick’s head, Tick slowly raised himself out of the water, spit, then took a deep breath.

“Say it, boy!” Billy yelled, unable to hide the frustration in his voice. If he couldn’t get Tick to obey, the tables would turn and *he’d* be the one suffering a humiliating defeat. “Say it or I’ll wrap your sorry scarf around your head and dunk you ’til you quit breathing.”

Tick felt a sudden surge of confidence and he spoke before he could stop himself. “Go ahead, Billy Boy. At least then I’d never have to look at your Frankenstein goat face again.”

His spirits soared when the crowd around them laughed. A few kids clapped and whistled.

“Frankenstein goat face!” one kid called out. “Billy the Frankenstein Goat Face!”

This created more laughs, followed by murmurs of conversation and shuffling of feet as people moved away, evidently having had enough.

“Leave him alone, Goat Face,” a girl yelled over her shoulder.

Tick closed his eyes and took a gulp of air, knowing Billy would push him down at least one more time, would hold him under longer than ever before. But to his shock, he felt his arm released; the pressure of Billy's knee against his spine disappeared. As Tick's entire right side lit up with tingles and pressure from the blood rushing back to where it belonged, he scooted away from the pool of water and turned to sit on his rear end, staring up at Billy.

The Goat looked down on him with an odd expression. It wasn't anger or hate. He seemed . . . surprised.

"You're weird, man," Billy said. "I'm sick of you anyway. Go home and cuddle with your Barf Scarf." He kicked Tick's leg, then turned to walk away with his hoodlum friends.

Tick didn't totally understand the storm of emotions that swelled within him at that moment, but he surprised himself when he laughed out loud right before the tears came.

~

As Tick walked home, he put Billy out of his mind and thought of the long three months he'd just endured. After the thrill and excitement, the life-threatening danger and escapades of Alaska, he'd expected to come home and barely rest, clue after clue and stranger after stranger showing up at his doorstep, delivering one adventure after another.

But nothing had happened. Nothing.

He and Sofia e-mailed back and forth, never failing to ask the other if they'd seen something or met someone. The answer was always a frustrated *NO!*

Where were the clues? What had happened to Mothball and Rutger? Did something get lost in the mail? Had they somehow proven themselves unworthy? Had the man in charge moved on to other, more deserving, kids? The questions poured out of their minds and into their e-mails, but no answer ever came back.

Tick was sick with discouragement.

All he could do was watch the snow pile up in his front yard all through January and February. The weathermen loved reminding their viewers that it had been the worst winter on record, revealing snow tallies in fancy charts with as much enthusiasm as if they were announcing the lottery winners. It was March before the snow finally started to melt, revealing patches of deadened grass that desperately longed for spring.

Tick hadn't missed a single day of school during the three months, trying his best to keep focused while he worried about not hearing from Master George. But even competing in the Jackson County Chess Tournament in the middle of March hadn't been the same and Tick had placed fifth in his age

bracket. His family seemed shocked that he'd lost the top spot, but his mind had been somewhere else, and the three-year winning streak ended with a dull thump instead of a big bang.

His dad constantly tried to cheer him up, encouraging him that something would come soon, but after a couple of months, even his dad seemed disheartened. Like a wounded snail limping to its next meal, Tick lived out each day hoping for a letter from Master George.

Tick did receive one exciting thing in the mail: a package of free spaghetti and sauce from Frupey the Butler. True to Sofia's word, it had tasted wonderful, and Tick knew he could never eat the cheap stuff again.

But even in the depths of the three-month doldrums, Tick and Sofia had never given up. They made a commitment to study their own journals every day, even if only for a few minutes, to keep their minds fresh, hoping something new might pop out and surprise them. They forced themselves to stay active in the game, even if the other side offered no help. And every day, no matter what, they sent an e-mail to each other.

Tick felt sure he'd hit rock bottom when he got home and checked his e-mail, clicking on a new one from Sofia.

Tick,

Hello from Italy.

Ciao.

Sofia

Tick groaned and wrote his own quick reply:

Sofia,

Howdy from America.

Later.

Tick

Depressed, Tick shut off the computer and slumped his way up the stairs to wait for dinner. A few minutes later, he fell asleep with the *Journal of Curious Letters* clasped in his arms like a teddy bear.

~

April sixth was a Saturday, and the sun seemed to melt away any remnants of clouds, beating down with a warmth that hadn't been felt in months. Tick

made his usual trek to check the mail, basking in the golden light, his spirits lifted despite the circumstances. The sounds of trickling water came from everywhere as the massive amounts of snow increased their melting pace, disappearing by inches a day now. It wouldn't be long before hundreds of tulips stood like fancy-hat-wearing soldiers all over the yard, the result of painstaking pre-winter planting by his mom over the years.

Even Tick, not exactly a flower expert, enjoyed his mom's ridiculous amount of tulips every spring.

As he made his way down the steaming sidewalk, Tick took a deep breath, loving the strong smells of the forest that returned with the melting snow. The scents of moist dirt and bark and rotting leaves that had lain beneath the white stuff all winter filled his nostrils, and he felt better than he had in months. Spring tended to do that to people.

His good mood was short-lived, though. When he saw that the mailman hadn't brought anything from Master George, he slipped right back into poor-little-Tick mode and went back inside the house.

~

Later that afternoon, Tick sat at the desk in his bedroom, working on the math homework he'd been too depressed to finish the day before. He'd opened up his window, grateful that he was able to do so without freezing to death; the winter had seemed to last for ten years. He was just finishing up his last problem when he heard the phone ring, followed by the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs and down the hall toward his room.

"Tick, it's your girlfriend."

He turned to see his sister Lisa at the door, holding out the phone.

"What?"

"Phone's for you. It's a girl."

Tick's first thought was that it must be Sofia—who else would call him? He jumped up from his desk and walked over to grab the phone. At the last second, Lisa put it behind her back, smirking at Tick.

"Wow, you seem awfully excited," she said, eyebrows raised. "Are we having a little love affair that we haven't shared with Sis?"

"Give it—it's probably my, uh, science project partner."

Lisa chuckled. "You're gullible, kid—it's actually a man." She handed him the phone and left.

Tick closed the door and sat on his bed, putting the receiver to his ear. "Hello?"

At first, all he could hear was static and the sounds of . . . beeping . . . or some kind of machinery in the background. Then came a loud clonk, followed

by a soft boink and then a rolling series of metal clicks, like someone cranking up a thick chain into a holding wheel. Finally, surprising him, he heard the distinct *meow* of a cat.

“Hello?” he repeated. “Anybody there?”

From the other end came a rattling sound as the person picked the phone back up. A voice spoke through the scratchy static, a man with the one accent Tick could identify—British. “Is this . . . let me see . . . ah, yes, is this Mister Atticus Higginbottom?”

“Yes . . . this is Atticus.”

“Uh, dear sir, you were supposed to be walking about today. I mean, er—it’s a nice day to go for a walk, don’t you think? Simply smashing, really, from what I hear.” The man coughed. Tick heard the cat meow again, followed by some muffled words as the stranger covered up his end with his hand. “In a *minute*, Muffintops. Patience, dear feline!”

“Sir, do I know you?”

“No, no, no, not yet, anyway. But we certainly have some common acquaintances, if you get my meaning. In fact, I’m on instruction from them, old chap.”

“On . . . instruction?”

“Yes, yes, quite right. They need you to go for a *walk*, good man. Asked me to call you.”

“A walk? Where?”

“The usual, I suppose. What’s a young master like yourself sitting inside all day for anyhow? Got a bit of the flu, do you?”

“No, I was just . . .” But the stranger had a point. Tick should be outside on the first beautiful day of the year so far.

“Well, off you go. Not a moment to waste.”

“But . . . where am I supposed to go? Who—”

“Cheers, old boy. Only a month to go—I mean, er, a month or two, yes, that’s right.”

“Wait,” Tick urged.

The phone clicked and went silent.

A Meeting in the Woods

Tick told his mom he had to go to the library, then headed out the door. Though he didn't need a jacket, he'd instinctively put on his scarf, which began to scratch and make him too warm before he'd made it past the driveway.

Stupid scarf. He loosened it, but he couldn't bring himself to take it off.

The cloudless sky was like a deep blue blanket draped across the world, not a blemish in sight. As much as Tick loved the winter and snow, even he had to admit it was about time for some warm weather.

As he left his neighborhood and started down the road that led through the woods to town, Tick thought about the phone call he'd received. Every instinct in his mind told him it had to be Master George—in fact, he realized he'd heard the voice once before. On the tape of the third clue.

Wow, he thought. *I just spoke with Master George.*

Master George!

Tick felt a shiver of excitement and a sudden bounce lifted his steps. After three grueling months, things seemed to be rolling again. He just hoped he had chosen the right direction to take a walk, though he couldn't think of another way that could possibly be classified as “the usual.”

He was almost to the spot where he'd seen the wooden sign with Rutger's silly poem scrawled across it when he felt something hit him in the right shoulder. A rock rattled across the pavement, and Tick looked into the woods across the street. The last time someone had thrown a rock at him—

Another one flew out of the trees, missing him badly.

“Rutger, is that you?” Tick said, cupping his hands around his mouth to amplify his voice.

No reply came, but a few seconds later another rock shot out, this time smacking him in the forehead. “Ow!” he yelled. “Do you really have to do that?”

“Yes!” a male voice said from within the thick trees.

Grinning, Tick crossed the street and stepped into the forest.

It didn't take long to find them. Rutger, his stomach sucked in as far as it would go—which wasn't much—hid behind a tall, thin tree with no branches,

his body jutting out on both sides. Mothball, on the other hand, was trying her best to squat behind a short, leafy bush, her head poking at least two feet above its top, her eyes closed as if that would somehow make her invisible.

It was one of the most ridiculous things Tick had ever seen.



“Uh, you guys really stink at hide-and-seek,” he said. Both of them stepped out from their hiding places, faking disgust.

They looked the same as the first time he’d met them. Rutger, incredibly short and round as a bowling ball, still wore his black clothes and the shoes and mittens Tick had given him months ago, though it seemed too warm for the outfit. Mothball had different clothes on, but they were still gray and hung on her eight-foot-tall frame like flags with no wind. The forest floor was mushy and wet and water dripped on them from the branches above.

“Ello, little sir,” the giant woman said, a huge smile crossing her wide face.

“Looks like you’re a lot smarter than we thought,” the tiny Rutger added—well, tiny in terms of height. If anything, he looked even *fatter* than the last time Tick had seen him. “But . . . I don’t suppose you brought any *food*?”

“Man, am I glad to see you guys again,” Tick said, ignoring Rutger’s plea for something to eat. “What took you so long?”

“’Tis all part of the plan, it is,” Mothball said in her thick accent, folding her huge arms together. “Master George—he’s a smart old chap—reckoned he’d take a long wait and see who stuck it out. You know, weed out the ninnies with no patience.”

“Last time you guys wouldn’t tell me M.G.’s name,” Tick said.

Rutger reached out and lightly slapped Tick on the leg. “Well, you figured it out yourself, now didn’t you? Wouldn’t it seem silly for us to not say his name when you already know what it is? Good job, old boy, good job!”

Tick knew he probably had little time available to him and wished he’d sat down to organize all of his questions before going out. He had a million things he wanted to ask, but his mind felt like soup in a blender. “So . . . how many kids like me are left? How many are still getting the clues?”

Rutger stared up at the sky as he slowly counted on his fingers. When he got to ten, he quit and looked at Tick. “Can’t tell you.”

“Thanks.”

Mothball shifted her large body and leaned back against a tree. “Master George sends his regrets on the bit of trouble you had in the northern parts. Never meant that to happen, he didn’t.”

Tick squinted his eyes in confusion. “Wait a minute, what do you mean by that?” He couldn’t put his finger on it, but something about her statement struck him as odd.

Rutger cleared his throat, trying to take the attention away from Mothball, whose face suddenly revealed she’d said something she wasn’t supposed to.

“All my good friend means,” Rutger said, “is that we never expected our, uh, enemy to catch up with you so quickly. Don’t worry, though, we’ve, uh, taken care of the problem for now.” He rolled his eyes and turned around,

whistling.

“Didn’t help matters much there, now did ya, my short friend?” Mothball muttered.

A swarm of confusion buzzed inside Tick’s head, and he felt like the answer was somewhere right in the middle if he could just get to it. “But . . . what about the Gnat Rat thing, and the Tingle Wraith? You make it sound like —”

“Come on, now,” Mothball said, straightening back to her full height. “Time’s a-wasting, little sir. Got a lot to talk about, we do.”

“But—”

“Mister Higginbottom!” Rutger interjected, spinning his wide body around to look at Tick once again. “I immediately demand you cease these questions, uh, immediately!”

Mothball snorted. “You just said *immediately* two times in the same sentence, you lug. Methinks he gets the point without you blowin’ a lung and all.”

Rutger fidgeted back and forth on his short legs, as if he’d only spouted off to save themselves from getting deeper into trouble. “Just trying to . . . teach the young master some patience and, uh, other . . . things like patience.”

“You two are without a doubt the strangest people I’ve ever met,” Tick said.

“Try living with a million Rutgers in one city,” Mothball said. “That’ll give you weak knees.” She paused, then laughed. “Quite literally, actually, if the little folks are in the punching mood.”

“Very funny, Flagpole,” Rutger said.

“Thanks much, Bread Dough,” she countered.

Tick thought it was fun watching the two friends argue, but he was hoping for answers. “Did you guys get me out here for a reason or what? And what’s up with the phone call from Master George?”

“Been sittin’ here all ruddy day, we ’ave,” Mothball said. “’Ad to spur you a bit, burn your bottoms to get a move on.”

“Couldn’t you have just knocked on my door?”

“What, and get the detectives called in? Spend the rest of me life in a Reality Prime zoo?”

Tick held up a hand. “Whoa, time out—what does that mean?”

“What?” Mothball asked, looking at her fingernails as though considering a manicure.

“What’s ‘Reality Prime’?” His mind spun, the word *reality* jarring something in his brain.

Mothball looked over at Rutger, shrugging her bony shoulders. “Methinks

the little sir's gotten hit over the head, he has. Did *you* 'ear me say that?"

"Say what?" Rutger asked, his face a mask of exaggerated innocence.

"I've already forgotten."

Tick groaned as loud as he could. "I'm not an idiot, guys."

Rutger reached up and grabbed Tick by the arm. "We know, kid, we know. So quit acting like one. We'll tell you what you need to know when you're ready, not a second before."

"So what, I can't ask questions?"

"Bet yer best buttons you can—ask away," Mothball said. "Just don't complain like a Rutger when we say mum's the word."

"Now wait just one minute . . ." Rutger said, letting go of Tick and pointing a finger at Mothball.

"I get it, I get it," Tick said before Rutger could continue. He thought about the list of words in his journal he'd heard from these two, framing questions inside his mind. "Okay, what's a kyoopy? Can you answer that?"

Mothball and Rutger exchanged a long look, signifying to Tick that this was no longer a black-and-white issue—which would be to his advantage. "Come on," he urged. "As long as you don't tell me how to figure out the clues, what does it matter if I know a little bit about what's behind all this?"

"Fair enough, methinks," Mothball said. "Master George does seem a bit more willing to let on. I mean, he called you on the telly, didn't he?" She gestured toward Rutger. "Go on, little man, tell him 'bout the kyoopy."

Rutger scowled. "Do I look like Hans Schtiggenschlubberheimer to you?"

"Hans *who*?" Mothball and Tick asked in unison.

Rutger looked like someone had just asked him what gravity was. "Excuse me? Hans Schtiggenschlubberheimer? The man who started the Scientific Revolution in the Fourth Reality? If it weren't for him, Reginald Chu would never have—" He stopped, looking uncertainly at Tick. "This is impossible, not knowing what we can and can't say in front of you. Blast it all, I can't wait until the special day gets here."

Of course, right then Tick thought of his teacher, Mr. Chu, just as he had when he saw "Chu Industries" on the Gnat Rat. But just like before, he didn't think it could have anything to do with his science instructor—it had to be a coincidence. "Who is Reginald Chu?" he asked. "And what kind of awful name is *Reginald*?"

"It's not a very fortunate name," Rutger agreed. "Downright stinky if you ask me. Fits the man, though, considering what he's done. Started out with good intentions, I'm sure, but he and his company have done awful, awful things."

"Well, what's he done? And what is the Fourth Reality? What are *any* of

the realities? Are there other versions of the universe or something?”

Mothball sighed. “This is balderdash, really.” She leaned over and put a hand on Tick’s shoulder. “Rutger’s spot on, he is. We just don’t know what to talk about with you. Methinks Master George will explain everything—if you make it that far.”

“Listen to me,” Rutger said. “Focus your mind on the clues for now. Don’t worry about all this other stuff. You can do it, and it will all be worth it—when the *day* comes. You’ll be taken to a very important place.”

Tick felt incredibly frustrated. “Fine, but at least . . . Can you just answer one question? Just one.”

Rutger nodded.

“Can you tell me, in one sentence each, the definition of a kyoopy and the definition of a . . . a reality. No details, and I won’t ask any more questions about it.”

Rutger looked up at Mothball, who shrugged her shoulders. “Blimey, just do it. The poor lad’s mind might explode if we don’t.”

“All right.” Rutger took a deep breath. “Kyoopy is a nickname for the theory of science that explains the background of everything we’re about.” He paused. “And a Reality is a place, uh, or a *version* of a place, if you will, that comes about *because* of the kyoopy.” He looked up at Mothball. “Wow, that was good.”

Right at that very second, something clicked for Tick and he felt like an idiot for missing it before. “Wait a second . . . kyoopy. You mean . . . Q . . . P . . . right? Q.P.?”

Rutger looked confused. “Was I saying it wrong before? Yes, yes! Q.P.”

“Looks like the little sir is on to something,” Mothball said, a satisfied smile on her lips, but Tick’s mind was in another world at that moment. Q.P. He’d heard that phrase before from Mr. Chu, and he couldn’t wait to ask him about it again.

Kyoopy. Q.P.

Quantum physics.

“Now,” Rutger said, clearing his throat, “could we *please* move on? I believe you’ll be wanting the next clue.”

A Bundle of Clues

The air had grown cooler as the sun made its way across the sky and toward the horizon. The drip-drip-drip of the melting snow slowed considerably, and Tick shivered as he eagerly waited to see the next clue.

Mothball pulled out a familiar yellow envelope, though this one seemed thicker than the others, and a separate piece of white paper had been stapled to the upper left corner, its edges flapping loosely as she handled it. After a long look at Rutger, Mothball handed the package over to Tick, who snapped it out of her hand without meaning to look so anxious.

“Thanks,” he said, fingering the note attached to the envelope. “What’s this?”

“Flip it over and read it,” Rutger answered. “Thought you could at least figure *that* out by yourself.”

“Very funny,” Tick muttered as he did what he was told, lifting the paper to read the few sentences typed on the back:

Within you will find the next four clues in the sequence, numbers 7, 8, 9, and 10. Now, most certainly you will read these and conclude to yourself that I, your humble servant, have gone batty because they don’t seem like clues at all. I will only say this: EVERYTHING you receive is a clue.

Tick looked up at Mothball then down at Rutger, whose folded arms were resting on his huge belly. “Four clues at once?”

“He’s a bit hasty,” Mothball said. “You see, has to be *twelve* clues, there does, and we’ve only got a short time to go, ya know.”

“Why does there have to be twelve?”

“’Tis part of the riddle, Master Tick.” She winked at him. “There you are, I’ve just given you my own bit of a clue. Quite clever, I am.”

“Yeah,” Rutger grumbled. “A regular Hans Schtiggenschlubberheimer.”

Mothball snapped her fingers as her face brightened with recognition. “Ah, I remember that name now! Yeah, me dad taught my sis and me all about him, he did. That bloke invented the very first version of the Barrier Wand.”

Rutger shushed Mothball. “Are you crazy? I thought we were done giving out secrets the boy doesn’t need to know yet.”

Mothball shrugged as she winked at Tick again. “It’s got nothing to do with the clues, little man. Give the sir somethin’ to think about, it will.”

“Barrier Wand?” Tick had heard those words before from Mothball. “I won’t even bother asking.”

Rutger turned to Tick, rolling his eyes as he nodded toward Mothball, as if he were shrugging off the escapades of a little kid. “Solve the riddle of Master George, be where you’re supposed to be on the special day, do what you’re supposed to do, go where you’re supposed to go—then you’ll know very well what a Barrier Wand is, trust me.”

“Sounds good . . . I guess.” Tick couldn’t wait to tear open the envelope of clues, but he also wanted to stand there all day and ask them questions. “Isn’t there anything else you can tell me? Anything?”

“Done opened our mouths quite enough, we have,” Mothball said. “Master George will probably step on his cat he’s so nervous about it all.”

“You mean . . . he can hear us? Do you have a microphone or something?”

Rutger laughed, a guffaw that echoed through the trees, like he’d just been told the funniest joke of the century. “You have much to learn, kid, much to learn.”

Tick looked down with mixed confusion and anger. “What’s so funny?”

Rutger stuttered his laugh to a stop, wiping his eyes with pudgy hands. “Oh, nothing, sorry. Nothing at all.” He cleared his throat.

“Well, off we go, then,” Mothball said. “Best of luck, Master Atticus.”

“Yes, yes, indeed,” Rutger added, reaching up to shake Tick’s hand vigorously. “Please, don’t take anything the wrong way. I’m a little funny in the head sometimes.”

“Yeah,” Tick said. “I noticed.”

Rutger’s face grew very serious. “Mothball and I . . . well, we’re rooting for you, kid, a great deal. You’ll make it, and we’ll meet you again very soon. Okay?”

“It’s in one month,” Tick blurted before he knew what he was saying. “May sixth. I have to go to a cemetery and stomp my right foot on the ground, at nine o’clock at night, and say certain words and close my eyes. I just have to figure out *what* to say, and—”

Rutger held up a hand. “Sounds like you’re on the right track.” He and Mothball exchanged a look, and there was no doubting the huge smiles of pride that spread across their faces.

So far, so good, Tick thought. *I just need to know the magic words.*

“We really must be going, now,” Rutger said. “Good luck to you, and be strong.”

He and Mothball folded their arms in unison, staring at Tick.

“Okay, see ya,” he said, then paused, waiting for them to turn and go. They didn’t move. “Aren’t you leaving?”

“Better we wait for you to be off,” Mothball said. “Just tryin’ to be proper and all.”

“Man, you guys are weird.” Tick smiled then, hoping they knew they had become two of his favorite people on the planet. He felt the familiar pang of good-bye, then gave a simple wave. “See ya later, I guess. Will you be there if I . . . make it—whatever that means?”

“We’ll be right there waitin’ on ya, we will,” Mothball said. “Be the grandest day of yer life, bet yer best buttons.”

Tick nodded, wishing he could think of a way to extend the visit, but knowing it was time to go. “Right. Okay. Bye.” He turned and walked away, heading back through the trees toward the road.

~

Tick ran all the way home, his sadness at saying good-bye to Mothball and Rutger quickly melting into anticipation of opening the next four clues.

He closed the door to his room and sat at his desk, wishing he could somehow transport Sofia from Italy so they could rip this thing open together. The thought made him want to kick himself for not asking Mothball and Rutger about their interactions with Sofia or any other kids. He wondered if Sofia had received this package yet. He’d have to e-mail her as soon as he was done taking a look.

He opened up the envelope and pulled out four pieces of cardstock, exactly the same as all the other clues. Each card had its own message typed in the middle of the page, with a number written in blue ink directly above it with a big circle around it, indicating its place in the sequence—seven through ten. Tick wondered about the significance of the order as he spread everything out on his desk in front of him, then read the first one, the seventh clue:

Go to the place you have chosen wearing nothing but your underwear. Oh, calm yourself, I’m only giving you a bit of rubbish. Don’t want you to think I’m without a sense of humor. No, quite the contrary—you must dress warmly because you never know where you’ll end up.

Tick paused, thinking. The first line had made his stomach turn over before he realized Master George was just kidding around. That’s all Tick needed was to go running across town in his undies to hang out at a graveyard in the middle of the night.

Nothing else about the clue seemed mysterious or riddle-like at all, giving weight to the little note that had been stapled to the front of the envelope. This

one seemed like nothing more than a warning to dress warmly. But according to the attached note, *everything* was a clue, so it had to have some kind of hidden message.

Just when I think I'm getting the hang of it, he thought, shaking his head. He moved on to the next one, the eighth clue:

Eventually you will fail. I say this because the vast majority of those who receive these letters will do so, utterly. For those extreme few of you who may succeed, I will conveniently explain away this clue as a small typing error. For you, it was meant to say, "Eventually you will not fail."

Tick surprised himself by chuckling out loud. This Master George guy had quite the sense of humor and sounded like he was as quirky as an elf in Santa's workshop. Tick couldn't wait to meet him.

As for the clue itself, there was nothing to figure out, no mysteries—not even any advice this time. More and more, Tick was beginning to think he'd missed something important he was supposed to get from these messages.

He moved on to the ninth clue:

Ordinary kids would've given up by now. I know what is haunting you, what is chasing you, what is making your life miserable. Cheer up, friend, much worse lies ahead.

This one made Tick sit back in his chair and pause for a very long time. It was the shortest clue yet, but packed with so much. The kindness of Master George showing empathy for what Tick was going through and the terrible things he'd seen. The encouragement that Tick wasn't just an ordinary kid. The pride knowing he'd stood up and endured. And finally, the almost humorous warning that he'd only seen the beginning and "much worse" was still to come.

Tick felt like three starving warthogs had been unleashed inside his brain, grunting and thrashing to find food. He wanted to know the truth, to know *everything*, so badly it made his head hurt, and he felt frustrated to no end. He'd just read the next *three* clues, and yet seemed no closer to discovering the magic words. If his family hadn't been downstairs, Tick would've screamed at the top of his lungs.

Almost reluctantly—almost—he read the final piece of paper from the envelope, the tenth clue:

Remember to bring two items with you, stowed carefully away in your pockets, while you say the magic words. Sadly, I must refrain from telling you what the items are. I can only say this: they must be

impossible to pick up, no matter how strong you are, but small enough to fit in your pockets, since that is where they must be, on penalty of death (or at least a particularly nasty rash). I realize this riddle is very easy, but my cat just messed on the Peruvian rug in my parlor, so I haven't much time to think of a better one. Good day.

Messed on the Peruvian rug in his parlor? Tick was beginning to like Master George more and more every second.

And the man was right—this one was too easy. Tick got up from his desk, excited to e-mail Sofia. Then he would show all the new clues to his dad.

~

It took him ten minutes to finally persuade Kayla to quit playing her Winnie the Pooh computer game, and another couple minutes to clean the sticky spots off the keyboard from her fingers. She'd broken the no-food-at-the-computer rule and helped herself to a Popsicle while maneuvering Pooh and Piglet through the horrible dangers of the Hundred Acre Wood.

He finally logged in to his e-mail and opened up the INBOX, hoping that Sofia had sent him something as well. His hand froze in midair, hovering over the mouse like a cloud when he saw what waited for him.

An e-mail from someone named "shadowka2056."

The subject line said, "Master George is crazy."

The Third Musketeer

Tick clicked open the e-mail, his heart pounding.

Dude, what's up with all this stuff, man? I couldn't believe it when I was finally non-stupid enough to search the Internet to see if there were any others like me. Can you believe all this is for real? Actually, I guess I should ask first if you're still doing this whole mess. For all I know you burned the letter a long time ago.

My name's Paul Rogers and I live in Florida. Ever been here? I can see that you're from Washington—man, we're like on opposite corners of America. How cool is that?

I don't know what to say until I know more about what you're up to. Have you gotten everything? Have you met Mothball and Rutger? They kept telling me I needed to go to one of the postmarked places to get another clue. I said, what do I look like, King Henry the Eighth? I ain't made of money, dude. I finally talked the little fat man into giving me the clue anyway. Looks like there's more than one way to skin a cat in this game.

Anyway, I'm up to Number Ten, how about you? If you don't have a clue what I'm talking about and think I'm totally bonkers, go ahead and delete this e-mail. Trust me, you don't wanna know.

Later,

Paul

Tick, excited, immediately hit **REPLY** and typed out his answer.

Dear Paul,

I'm really glad you wrote me. I'm totally still in it, and I'm up to the tenth clue as well. Pretty easy one, right? Hands. Our hands. You can't really pick up your own hands, but they can fit in your pockets nice and easy. It's about time we had one that was simple, huh?

I actually did go to Alaska—it was my dad's idea. We almost got

killed, but it wasn't too bad. We met a funny guy named Norbert who's met Master George! And he also met some crazy lady named Mistress Jane. From what Norbert said, I don't think I want to meet her.

There's another one of us—Sofia. She's from Italy and she was there, too. She didn't almost get killed though. But she did help save us.

Man, this e-mail sounds so stupid. By the way, you can call me Tick.

Have you figured out the magic words? I just don't get it—I've studied that first letter backward and forward and I don't see anything. I'm really hoping you know something I don't.

I don't really know what else to say. It's good to know there are at least three of us now. May 6th is coming soon.

Your new friend,

Tick

Feeling kind of dumb because he didn't say much worthwhile, but not knowing what else to do until he knew the guy better, Tick hit the SEND button, hoping Paul would reply quickly since he lived in the same country.

Tick then sent another e-mail to Sofia, telling her everything and asking her if she received the package of four clues.

~

On Monday, Tick sat in Mr. Chu's class, anxious for it to be over. Tick wanted to ask him about quantum physics, see if he could learn anything new that would give him a hint about what the "kyoopy" had to do with Master George. A warm sun beat on the windows, making the room hot and stuffy. Several kids had given up long ago, their heads making ridiculous jerking motions as they kept falling asleep and waking up.

Tick had yet to hear back from either the new kid Paul or Sofia. He must've checked his e-mail at least twenty times on Sunday, with no luck. He didn't get it—every time *he* got an e-mail, he responded in a second, excited to keep the conversation going. Oh, well.

The bell finally rang and the students filed out of the room, at least three of them bumping into Tick's desk and knocking off his things. Each time, he picked them up without a word and put them back on his desk. The bully stuff seemed so silly now compared to the other things he was dealing with that nothing bothered him anymore. He defiantly adjusted his scarf and waited for the classroom to empty.

“Tick?” Mr. Chu asked as he finished erasing the whiteboard. “Aren’t you going to your next class?”

Tick stood up. “Yes, sir. I just wanted to know if you’d have any time after school to talk about . . . something.”

“Sure,” Mr. Chu replied, raising his eyebrows in concern. “Is anything—”

“No, no, nothing’s wrong. I’m just wondering about a subject we talked a little about a while back and I want to know more about it.”

“What is it?”

Tick paused, nervous that somehow saying the two words would reveal everything about Master George and his mysteries. “Quantum physics,” he finally sputtered out, as if ashamed of the topic.

“Oh, really?” Mr. Chu’s face brightened at the prospect of sharing information on his favorite science subject. “What’s sparked your interest?”

“I don’t know—just curious I guess.”

“Well, okay, I’d be happy to talk about it. Come by after school, okay?”

“Okay. Thanks.” Tick gathered his things and headed off to his next class.

~

Long after the last bell had rung, Tick and Mr. Chu sat at his desk, discussing the many theories—all of them confusing—of quantum physics. The stale smells of dried coffee and old books filled the air as Tick leaned forward, his elbows resting on top of several messy piles of papers that needed grading. Through the window over his teacher’s shoulder, Tick could see the long shadows of late afternoon creeping across the parking lot, where only a few cars remained.

“It’s basically the study of everything that’s teensy tiny,” Mr. Chu was saying. “Now that doesn’t sound like a very technical term, but that’s what it’s all about. Forget about the atom—that thing’s huge. We’re talking about electrons and protons and neutrons. And stuff that’s even smaller—quarks and gluons. Sound like fun?”

“Well . . . yeah, actually,” Tick answered.

“The basic thing you need to know is that all the stuff you *think* you know about the laws of physics—like, what goes up must come down—goes right out the window when you get down to particles that small. It’s been proven those rules don’t apply. Everything is different. And did you know that light has properties of both waves *and* particles . . .”

Mr. Chu went on to talk for at least a half hour straight, telling Tick all the basics of quantum physics and the experiments scientists had done to establish theories. What it really sounded like, though, was all a fancy way to say no one had a clue how it worked or why it was different from the big

world.

“ . . . and so by *observing* an electron, you are actually *deciding* where it is, what position it’s in, what speed it’s moving. And another person could be doing an alternate experiment at the same time, observing the same electron, but in a totally different position. Now, this is getting on the fringe of what the real experts say, but some people think an electron and other particles can literally be in more than one place at once—an infinite number of places!”

Tick felt like he was a pretty smart kid, but some of Mr. Chu’s words made as much sense to him as an opera sung in pig latin. But that last sentence really made him think. “Wait a minute,” he said, stopping his teacher. “You keep talking about these little guys like they’re in a different universe. But aren’t those tiny things inside my body, inside this chair, inside this desk? Isn’t the big world you talked about just a whole bunch of the little worlds?”

Mr. Chu clapped his hands. “Brilliant!”

“Huh?”

“You nailed it, Tick, exactly.” Mr. Chu stood up and paced around the room in excitement as he continued talking. “They’re not really separate sciences—they have to be related because *one* is made of the *other*. An atom is a bunch of tiny particles, and you, my friend, are nothing but a bunch of atoms.”

“Right.”

“This is where all the crazy, crazy theories come in—the ones that are so fascinating. One theory is that time travel is possible because of quantum physics. I don’t buy that one at all because I think time is too linear for time travel to work.”

Tick’s head hurt. “Are there any you do believe in?”

“I don’t know if *believe* is the right word, but there are some I sure love to think about.” He paused, then sat back down at his desk and leaned forward on his elbows, looking into Tick’s eyes. “One theory says there are different versions of the world we live in—alternate realities. An infinite number of them. If it can happen on the teensy-tiny level, why not on the big fat level too? All it would take is some vast manipulation of all those little particles that make up the *big* particles. Who knows—there might be some force in the universe, some law we don’t know about, that can control quantum physics and even create or destroy different versions of our own world.”

Mr. Chu had talked nonstop without breathing and finally took a big gulp of air.

“Sounds like it’d make a sweet movie,” Tick said, trying to act like a normal kid with simple interests. But the truth was his thoughts were spinning out of control. Different versions of the world! Though he couldn’t quite piece it all together, he knew this might explain where Mothball and Rutger

came from.

“Oh, trust me, it’s been done,” Mr. Chu replied. “Especially the time travel part of it—but nothing I’ve seen that I like yet.” He yawned. “I’ve talked your poor ear off for long enough, big guy. If you’re really serious about studying Q.P., you should get a book or two from the library. It’s fun stuff, especially for nerds like you, I mean, me.” He smiled as he stood up and held out his hand. “Nice talking to you, Tick. It’s always great to have students who actually *care* about what they’re learning.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Tick said as he stood to leave. “See you tomorrow.” He slung his backpack onto his shoulder and headed for the door. At the last second before leaving, another teacher—Ms. Myers—poked her head in from the hallway.

“Reginald, do you have a moment?” she asked. “I need to talk about parent-teacher conferences.”

“Sure,” Mr. Chu replied. “Come on in. Tick, we’ll see you later. Thanks for coming by.”

Tick almost dropped his books at the word *Reginald*, the coolness of their entire conversation fading into a disturbing, eerie feeling in his stomach. He forced out a good-bye then quickly exited into the hallway.

He couldn’t believe it, but he knew he’d never heard his favorite teacher’s first name before. *It was Reginald? His name was Reginald Chu?*

Tick suddenly felt very, very ill.

Paul's Little Secret

Tick lay on his back, staring up at the ceiling of his room as the last rays of the sun faded from the day, casting a darkly golden glow to the air. His stomach felt like someone had jacked up an industrial hose and pumped in five tons of raw sewage.

Reginald Chu.

He had thought it was all just a coincidence, but that was before he'd learned Mr. Chu's first name. Rutger said the founder and owner of Chu Industries, the ones who manufactured the Gnat Rat and had done "awful, awful things," was a man named Reginald Chu. Could there really be two people with that name in the world, much less two who both loved science? And who had both crossed paths with a kid named Atticus Higginbottom?

No way.

But then . . . how could his favorite teacher be someone who owned a major company the world had never heard of? Tick had looked up Chu Industries several times on the Internet, only to find nothing. Of course, he hadn't looked up the *name* Reginald Chu yet.

He got up from bed and headed downstairs, hoping a search might reveal something. As he passed Kayla on the stairs, clutching no fewer than five dolls in her small arms, Tick thought about the things he and Mr. Chu had discussed after school. One thing popped in his mind that seemed the most obvious answer to this dilemma.

Time travel. Mr. Chu created this horribly powerful company in the future and sent things back in time to haunt his old students.

Tick almost laughed out loud—talk about hokey and ridiculous. Despite the crazy stuff he'd seen the last few months, it didn't make him think any more than before that time travel was possible. Even Mr. Chu said it was a dumb theory. *Of course, if he was a bad guy . . .*

But what about the idea of alternate versions of the universe? Maybe his teacher had an alter ego in another reality. Just as nuts, but for some reason not *quite* as nuts. Tick shook his head, unable to believe he was actually having this conversation with himself.

He logged onto the Internet, then did a search for the name "Reginald Chu."

Three hits.

One obscure reference to a presentation Mr. Chu did at Gonzaga University with some other teachers, and a couple of unrelated hits about a guy in China. That was it. Just for fun, Tick typed in Chu Industries again, with the same result.

Nothing.

Trying his best to move his mind on to brighter things, he logged into his e-mail. He almost jumped out of his chair with joy when he saw replies from both Sofia and the new guy in Florida.

He froze for a second, not knowing which one to open first.

He clicked on Sofia's.

Tick,

Wow, another kid! Why did it have to be another American? That's all I need, running around with two boys who do nothing but eat hot dogs and belch and talk about stupid American football.

Yeah, I figured out the riddle about hands, too. BEFORE I got your e-mail, just in case you're wondering.

Next time you write this Paul boy, make sure to put my name in the address, too. That way we can all talk together.

Time is running out! We need to figure out the Magic Words!

Ciao,

Sofia

Oh, please, Tick thought. *She just has to make sure I know she figured it out on her own.*

He was about to hit REPLY on instinct, but remembered the e-mail from Paul. Tick quickly closed the one from Sofia and clicked on the other.

Tick,

Dude, are you serious about the whole Alaska thing? Man, I need to hear that story from the beginning. Try to do a better job of it next time—I couldn't understand a single thing you said about it. :)

I must be the dumbest person this side of the Mississippi because I didn't get the hands thing at first. Now it seems really obvious.

But that's okay. I'm one up on you, big time.

I figured out the magic words.

See ya later, Northern Dude.

Paul

P.S. No way I'm telling so don't ask. Rutger said I'm not allowed to. We can talk about anything else, but each person has to figure out the magic words for themselves. Good luck.

P.P.S. I'm fourteen years old, six feet tall (yes, six feet), African-American, and drop-dead handsome. I love to surf, I play the piano like freaking Mozart, and I currently have three girls who call me every day, but my mom always tells them I'm in the bathroom. Let me know a little about you, too. Later.

What!

Tick sat back, unable to believe his eyes. He couldn't care less about Paul's little introduction at the moment—the guy knew what the magic words were! It was finally right there for the taking, but he wouldn't—*couldn't*—share.

That stupid little Rutger . . .

Tick hit the REPLY button, then added Sofia's e-mail address right after Paul's. From now on, hopefully they could stay connected as a trio and make their way toward the special day together. After pausing to think about what he wanted to say, Tick started typing.

Paul (and Sofia),

Okay, this e-mail has both of your addresses on it, so be sure and do that from now on so we can keep in touch. Paul, this is Sofia. Sofia, this is Paul. I'll forward the different e-mails to everyone later. Sofia needs to know that Paul seems to think he's something special. :)

Paul, did you really figure out the magic words? Are you serious? You really can't tell us? I've looked at that first letter over and over and over and I can't find the answer! Sofia, Rutger told Paul we're allowed to share and help each other, BUT NOT ABOUT THE MAGIC WORDS.

(If I ever get my hands on that guy . . .)

Sofia and I will just have to start figuring out a way to get you to tell us anyway.

Tick went on to write a very long e-mail, telling the story of Alaska and a

little about himself and Sofia. When he finally finished and turned off the computer, Tick's eyes hurt. He was just standing when his mom called everyone in for dinner.

~

Frazier Gunn sat in his little prison cell and brooded.

How had it come to this? He'd been having a dandy of a time in Alaska, pulling off his plan to take care of *two* of the bratty kids George was scheming with—and poof. Everything fell to pieces.

After being knocked out in the freezing cold cemetery, Frazier had awakened in this teeny little room, which was barred and chained with enough locks to hold the Great Houdini. The walls of his cell were made of metal, lines of rivets and bolts all over the place. He felt like a grenade locked in an old World War II ammunition box.

And he'd been here for over *three months*. His captor had obviously injected him with a shockpulse because his nanolocator was dead, not responding whenever he tried to send a signal to Mistress Jane. Plus, if it had been working, she would've winked him away a long time ago. Of course, that fate might be worse than his current one. The woman had a nasty temper and low tolerance for failure.

At least he had a comfortable bed in which to sleep. And delicious food slipped through a small slot on the bottom of the door three times a day without fail. He'd been given books to read and a small TV with a DVD player and lots of movies. Mostly about cats, oddly enough, but still, it was enough to keep him occupied for a while.

But *three months*. He felt his mind slipping into an abyss of insanity.

To make matters worse, the room *swayed*. Not very much and not very often, but he could feel it. It was like a gigantic robot trying to put her cute little metal box to bed. He kept telling himself it was all in his imagination, but it sure seemed real enough when he leaned over the toilet and threw up.

Frazier was a miserable, miserable man, and it only poured salt in his wounds that he didn't know *why* he was here, or who had captured him.

It had to have something to do with that nuisance of all nuisances, George. *Master George. Please. What kind of man has the audacity to refer to himself as Master anything?*

The sound of scraping metal jolted him from his moping. He looked up to see a small slot had slid open in the center of the main door, only a couple of inches tall and wide and about waist-high from the floor.

This is new. He stood and walked over to the opening, peeking through. He yelped and fell backward onto his bed when a cat's face suddenly appeared, baring its fangs and hissing.

“Who’s there!” he yelled, his voice echoing off the walls with a hollow, creepy boom. He recovered his wits and righted himself, staring at the small open space. The cat had already disappeared, replaced by a mouth with an old ruddy pair of chapped lips.

“Hello in there?” the mouth spoke, the voice heavy with an English accent.

“Yeah, who is it?” Frazier grunted back at his captor, though he already knew who was behind the door.

“Quite sorry about the inconvenience,” Master George said. “Won’t be long now before we send you on your way.”

“*Inconvenience?*” Frazier snarled. “That’s what you call locking up a man for three months?”

“Come on, old chap. Can you blame us after what you did to those poor children?”

“Just following orders, old man.” Frazier sniffed and folded his arms, pouting like a little kid. “I never meant any true harm. I was, uh, just playing around with the car to scare them. No big deal.”

“I must say,” George countered, “I disagree quite strongly with your assessment of the situation. Mistress Jane has gotten too dangerous. She’s gone too far. I mustn’t allow you to return to her until . . . we’ve taken care of something.”

“Taken care of what?”

“Just one more month or so, my good man,” George replied, ignoring the question. “Then we’ll send you off to the Thirteenth where we won’t have to worry about you coming back.”

Intense alarms jangled in Frazier’s head. What the old man had just said made no sense. Unless . . .

“What do you—”

His words died in the metallic echo of the small door sliding shut.

Shattered Glass

A week went by with Tick, Sofia, and Paul e-mailing each other almost every day. They talked about their lives, their families, their schools. Though Tick had never met Paul and had met Sofia only once, he felt like they'd all become great friends.

Tick and Sofia used every ounce of persuasive skills they possessed to convince Paul to tell them the magic words. On more than one occasion, Sofia even threatened bodily harm, never mind that she lived on another continent. But Paul stubbornly refused, not budging an inch. Finally, the other two gave up and reluctantly admitted he was right, anyway. Better to follow the rules in this whole mess than risk jeopardizing their chances of achieving the goal all together.

The goal. What was the goal? Yeah, they pretty much knew that on the special day they had to perform a silly ritual in a certain place—probably to show their ability to follow instructions and obey orders as much as to show they could solve the riddles of the clues. But then what would happen?

Tick felt strongly that if they did everything correctly, they would *travel* to another place. Somehow Mothball and Rutger were doing it. Somehow Master George was traipsing about the world to all kinds of strange places, mailing letters. Tick always felt a surge of excitement when he considered the possibilities of what may happen on the special day, only to have it come crashing down when he remembered he hadn't figured out the magic words.

After dinner one night, Tick sat at his desk, his *Journal of Curious Letters* open before him, while his dad lounged on the bed with his hands clasped behind his head. Tick had told him everything, but his dad hadn't been much help, falling back on his normal Dad capacity of offering encouragement and rally cries. Tick suspected his dad knew more than he let on, but that he felt much like Paul did—it was up to Tick to solve the puzzle.

“Go through your list again,” his dad said. “Everything we know needs to happen on May sixth.”

Tick groaned. “Dad, we've gone over this a million times.”

“Then once more won't hurt. Come on, give it to me.”

Tick flipped to the page where he'd accumulated his conclusions. “Okay, on May sixth, I need to be in a cemetery—any cemetery—with no one else there but all the dead people.”

“That excludes me, unfortunately.” His dad let out an exaggerated sigh. “I still don’t know if I’m going to let you do this.”

“Dad, it’ll be fine. It’s probably a good thing you won’t be there, anyway—I’m sure I’ll be abducted by aliens or something.”

“Whoa, now *that’s* a dream come true.”

Tick rubbed his eyes, then kept reading. “I need to be dressed warmly, and at nine o’clock on the nose I need to say the magic words, with my eyes closed, then stomp on the ground with my right foot ten times—all while keeping both of my hands in my pockets.”

“Is that it?”

“That’s it.”

His dad rolled into a sitting position on the bed with a loud grunt. “All that’s pretty easy, don’t you think?”

“Well . . . yeah, except for one tiny thing.”

“The magic words.”

Tick nodded. “The magic words. At this rate, Paul will be the only one of the three of us who gets to . . . do whatever it is that’s gonna happen.”

His dad scratched his chin, doing his best Sherlock Holmes impression. “Son, it can’t be that hard. I mean, all the other clues have been challenging and fun, but not really *hard*, you know what I mean?”

“Maybe this is Master George’s last way of weeding out those who aren’t willing to stick with it. Maybe I’m one of those last schmoes who ends up losing. The seventh clue said most people would fail.”

“Listen to me,” his dad said, unusually serious. “I don’t care what happens, and I don’t care who this Master George fancy lad from England is. You’re not a *schmoe*, and you never will be. You hear me?”

“Yeah, but . . .” Tick’s eyes suddenly teared up and his heart seemed to swell and grow warm, like his veins had brought in steaming hot soup instead of the usual blood. It hit him then that he was worried—no, scared—that he wasn’t going to solve the riddle of the magic words. He’d analyzed the first letter from M.G. more times than he could count, and nothing had come to him.

His dad got up and knelt next to his son, pulling him into his arms. “I love you, kid. You mean more to me than you can ever know, and that’s all that matters to me.”

“Dad, no offense, but . . . I mean, I really appreciate all your help.” He pulled back from the hug and looked at his dad. “I want this so bad. I know it sounds dumb, but I *want* this. I’ve never really done anything important before, and Master George said I might be able to save peoples’ lives.”

“Then by golly we’ll figure it out, okay? Give me that jour—”

His words cut off when a thunderclap of broken glass shattered the silence, followed by the tinkle of falling shards and a loud thump on the floor. Dad fell onto his back with a yelp and Tick's hand went to his chest, clutching his shirt like an old woman shocked by the spectacle of kids skateboarding in a church parking lot.

Someone had wrapped a note around a rock and then thrown it through the window.

While his dad went for the rock, Tick ran to the window to see if he could get a look at who had thrown it. He just caught a glimpse of a figure leaving the front yard and disappearing into the thicker trees of the neighboring woods.

A very short, very fat, figure.



Snickering, Rutger waddled along on his short legs through the dark trees and back to the main road. The thrill of throwing the rock had been a great boon to his spirits, and he had enjoyed every second of it. Now he just had to get away before Tick caught him.

As he thought about it more while escaping, he realized that breaking one of the Higginbottoms' windows maybe hadn't been the smartest thing to do, or the nicest. But it sure was funny.

He crossed the road and entered the forest on the other side, trying to remember the best way back to the old abandoned graveyard. He could've stuck to the road for a while longer, but he was worried he'd be caught. As he paused behind an enormous bush—it had to be big to hide *him*—he heard Tick's voice from a distance.

“Did you really have to break my window, Rutger!” the kid yelled.

Rutger laughed, then set off again, feeling his way in the darkness.

~

Tick and his dad walked up and down the road a few times, trying to spot the eccentric little man, but he was nowhere in sight, the darkness too deep. A slight breeze picked up, making Tick shiver.

“I can't believe he broke my window,” he said, but then he laughed.

“You think it's funny, huh?” Dad said.

“Actually . . . yeah. That guy's crazy.”

“Well, young man,” Dad said in his best attempt at a stern voice, “maybe you won't laugh so much when I tell you it's coming out of your allowance. Come on, let's go see what the note said.”

~

Tick picked up the rock, which was about the size of his fist, and carefully pulled the pieces of tape off the white cardstock that had been wrapped around the hard, cold surface. When he finally got it off safe and sound, he turned it over to see that it was the next clue—number eleven—from Master George.

“Read it, read it,” his dad urged.

Tick read it out loud as he devoured each word with his eyes.

Given that the day is almost here, I will issue a final warning. If you succeed in this current endeavor, your life will be forever altered, becoming dangerous and frightful. If you do not, very bad things will happen to people you may never meet or know. The choice to continue is yours.

“Dang it,” Tick said.

“What?”

“I was hoping he’d give us another hint on how to come up with the magic words. This isn’t a clue.” Tick waved the paper in the air, then dropped it on the desk next to his journal. “It’s just a warning. No different from the stuff he said in the very first letter.”

“But remember,” his dad pointed out, “he said *everything* you receive is a clue.”

“Yeah, well right now I’m kind of sick of it.” Tick flopped onto his bed and rolled over toward the wall.

After a long pause, his dad spoke quietly. “Sleep on it, Professor. You’ll feel better in the morning, I promise.”

The floor creaked as his dad walked toward the hallway; then the light went off and he heard the soft thump of his dad gently closing the door.

Despite the tornado of thoughts churning inside his mind, Tick fell asleep.

~

Tick knows he’s dreaming, but it’s still creepy.

He’s in the forest, moonlight breaking the darkness just enough to make the trees look like twisted old trolls, their limbs reaching out to grab him, choke him.

Leaves and snow swirl around his body like fairies on too much pixie dust. A huge tree looms at his back. Tick watches the leaves spinning in the air, mesmerized.

He jumps to catch one, and some unseen force holds him in the air . . .

And then the leaves turn into letters.

One by one the letters pass in front of Tick, glowing briefly, teasing him with their riddles, reminding him that he can’t solve the biggest one of all. The first letter.

The first letter.

The first letter . . .

The Final Clue

The last yellow envelope from Master George came on the third of May, only three days before the Big Day. Tick came home from school on a warm and rainy afternoon to find it on his pillow, addressed to him and postmarked from Brisbane, Spain.

Until then, he'd been in a foul mood, with good reason.

Two days earlier, Sofia had announced she was pretty sure she'd solved the riddle of the magic words. Positive, in fact. Tick knew he should be happy for her, but instead felt jealous and angry. Especially since he knew she couldn't tell him; in his mind it was like Paul and Sofia had this secret about Tick and kept giggling about it behind his back.

With each passing day May sixth grew closer and closer and Tick became more dejected, moping around like an old man searching for his lost soul in an Edgar Allan Poe story. He just didn't get it—he was smart. He'd always thought he was way smarter than anyone his own age, and many who were older. Yet for some reason he couldn't figure out those stupid magic words! Paul and Sofia did it, why couldn't he?

As Tick opened the last letter, hoping against hope it somehow held the final link to the magic words, he thought again about how odd it was that Master George traveled around the world to mail his messages. And how Mothball and Rutger got around the world so quickly. It had to be something magical, and Tick sure hoped he'd find out all about it in three days.

He pulled out the white cardstock. The last clue. Scared to death he'd finish it and be no better off than before, he almost reluctantly read its words:

Everything you need to determine the magic words is in the first letter. Quit struggling so much and read them, won't you? Listen to the words of Master George—they've been there all along! This is the last clue. I shall never see or speak to you again. Unless I do. Good-bye, and may the Realities have mercy on you.

Tick slumped down on his bed, groaning out loud. It seemed like the last few clues had been a complete . . .

Wait a minute.

He sat back up and put the paper in his lap, reading through the clue again. Had Master George made a mistake while typing it? The second sentence

made no sense.

Quit struggling so much and read them, won't you?

Read *them*? Why would he say *them* when referring to the first letter he'd sent out? There'd been only one piece of paper in that original envelope, so why would he use the plural word *them* when telling Tick to read it? The first letter . . .

Tick stopped. He felt like the Earth had stopped spinning and the air had frozen around him in an invisible block of ice; his mind and spirit seemed to step out of his body and turn around to look at him, not believing he could've missed something so obvious.

The first letter.

He grabbed his journal, ripping it open to find the clue that had first revealed he needed to discover magic words to say on May sixth. It had been the second clue, telling him that at the appointed time, he would need to say the words with his eyes closed. Master George couldn't tell him what the words were, but the last sentence told him how he could figure it out himself:

Examine the first letter carefully and you will work them out.

Old M.G. had been purposefully tricky with his language to throw his readers off the trail. When Tick read that clue the first time, his mind had immediately interpreted it as referring to the very first letter he'd received in the mail from Master George. And once that had been set in his mind, he'd never even considered the possibility of a different meaning. But what the mysterious man really meant *was* something entirely different.

The first letter.

Not the first envelope. Not the first paper. Not the first message.

The first *letter*.

M.G. meant that Tick needed to literally examine the first *letter* of something. And only one possibility made sense. Even though some of the Twelve Clues had not seemed like clues at all, Master George had been very clear.

Everything is a clue.

His blood racing through his veins like he'd just done windsprints, setting his heart into a thumpity-thump that he could feel and hear in his ears, Tick went through his *Journal of Curious Letters* page by page, clue by clue. He kept a finger on the last page of the dusty old book, flipping back there after seeing each of the twelve riddles in turn, jotting down a letter then going back again.

One by one, Tick wrote down the first letter of each clue, twelve letters in

all. When he finished, he sat back and stared at the result, wanting to laugh and cry and scream at the same time.

M A S T E R G E O R G E

The Miracle of Screaming

Tick took his journal downstairs with him, eager to e-mail Sofia and Paul and let them know he'd finally—*finally*—figured it out. He placed his precious book on the desk and quickly logged in and sent off the messages, his excitement building by the second. He couldn't wait until his dad got home from work so he could tell him, too.

It's all in place now, he thought. Just three days and it's really going to happen!

Of course, he didn't know what "it" was, but that was beside the point.

Tick stood up from the computer desk and stretched, suddenly happier than he'd been in weeks. He felt stupid for all the jealous feelings he'd had toward his new friends and the whole thing in general; he'd acted like a little baby, at least within his own mind.

But that was all in the past, now. *Three days.*

So bottled up with energy he could hardly stand it, he decided to run over to the library and hang out like he didn't have a care in the world. Maybe he'd check out a book and read it as a reward. He'd probably have just enough time to finish it before the Big Day came. He told his mom he'd be back in time for dinner and headed out the door.

Halfway to the library, the sun finally breaking through the storm clouds that had hung over the world all day, he realized he'd left his journal sitting on the computer desk back home and wondered if he should go back and put it away. *No, I won't be gone that long.* As he ran on, he hoped he didn't look as ridiculously happy as he felt.

Kayla noticed the ugly old book sitting on the computer desk, wondering where it had come from. It looked like something from her favorite Disney cartoon. Maybe it was a book of pirate treasure maps! She was a very young girl, but she knew one thing for certain.

Pirate treasure maps equal fun.

She looked around to make sure no one was around, then grabbed the book from the desk, pulling it down onto her lap as she sat on the floor. Words were written in a little box in the center of the cover, but she recognized the first one right away.

Tick.

Uh-oh, she thought. *He doesn't like me to mess with his things.*

Well, just a peek couldn't hurt, could it?

She opened the book up and flipped through the pages, seeing lots of pieces of paper that had been glued to the ones already there. No pirate maps though. Maybe this was an art project her brother had been putting together as a surprise for her, though it wasn't very pretty. All it had were a bunch of words that looked funny.

Kayla quickly grew bored, sad the book didn't have anything to do with pirates. She was flipping through it one last time when one of the pieces of paper slipped into the air like it had been shot out of a cannon and dropped to the floor in front of her. She picked it up and saw that this one had more words than any of the others—a *lot* more.

The glue must've cracked, letting the boring old paper escape.

Well, Kayla thought, *now I'm in a pickle*. Her mom wouldn't let her use glue without a grown-up around and if she asked for help, her mom might be mad that she'd broken Tick's book. Plus, she couldn't remember exactly where the piece of paper had been inside the book.

Maybe, just maybe, Tick wouldn't notice it was missing since so many other papers were glued throughout. And if she just stuck it somewhere or threw it away, he might find it and then he'd know for sure she'd been messing with his stuff.

Kayla put the book back on the desk, then clutched the loose paper in her hands. With devious eyes, she looked over at the fireplace, focusing on the little knob that started up the gas and flame.

It'd been awhile since she'd had fun with fire . . .

~

Tick walked down the road of his neighborhood, holding the nice, thick book he'd checked out at the library. The sun slowly fell toward the horizon, the first glowing fingers of twilight creeping through the trees. Tomorrow was Saturday and after months and months of thinking and solving and worrying and running, he couldn't wait to spend a couple of days relaxing.

On instinct, he checked the mailbox when he got to his house, even though he already knew his mom had gotten it earlier—hence the twelfth clue. Tick couldn't help but hope absolutely nothing else happened until Monday night, the Big Day. He needed a break from all the stress.

Easy to say when you have it all figured out, he thought. He'd sure not enjoyed the three-month-long "break" he'd had after Christmas.

He walked down the driveway toward his front door.

~

Kayla knew she didn't have much time. The warm fire licked the air with an almost silent whooshing sound, reminding her of how much she loved watching things burn. Now that it was mostly warm outside, they never had the flames going, and if her mom walked in, there'd be a certain favorite doll that would get locked away for a whole week. She needed to hurry.

She threw the stupid piece of paper into the flames.

A wave of ugly black stuff, rimmed with a fiery line of glowing orange, traveled across the paper from both of the short sides as the whole thing slowly curled up into a ball. A little line of smoke escaped into the room, and in a few seconds, all that remained was a crispy sheet of ash.

"Kayla, what are you doing!"

She jumped at her brother's voice, letting out a little shriek as she turned around to see him standing right behind her. Without meaning to, her eyes immediately looked over at the book sitting on the computer desk.

Tick followed her gaze, then practically leaped over to grab the book. He flipped it open, his eyes showing he already knew what had happened. His face reddened, his hands began to shake. He almost dropped the book. Then a *tear* fell out of his right eye. Kayla didn't understand; why would such a dumb old—

Tick's shout, full of rage, cut off her thoughts. "Bad girl, Kayla! You're a very bad, bad, naughty, stupid, naughty girl!" Then he ran out of the room and out the front door, slamming it closed behind him.

Kayla bawled.

~

Tick ran.

Clutching the journal in both arms, he didn't know where he was going, or how long it would last, but all he could do was run, his loosened scarf flapping in the wind. His heart wanted to explode out of his chest, panic and anger and disappointment crushing his feelings like someone had injected a full-sized elephant into his bloodstream. It hurt, and tears flowed down his face as he pounded the pavement with his clumsy feet. He fell twice, only to get up and keep running.

How could Kayla have done something so *stupid*! Everything had just fallen into place, everything was perfect. But now the message had been sent. Tick didn't know how, but he *knew* it had been sent.

Burn the letter, stop the madness.

Tick had been cut off. Even though he'd figured out all the clues, and was ready to perform the silly ritual in three days—he'd been cut off. Somehow

Master George would know the first letter had been burned, which meant he'd think Tick had given up and was out of the game.

After everything, after all that work and sweat and danger, it was all over.

Tick was in the forest now, still running, dodging trees and brush, tripping and getting back up again, ignoring the scratches. He sucked at the air around him, forcing it into his lungs so his heart wouldn't give up and die.

But then it finally became too much. He stopped, doubling over to take in huge, gulping breaths. Sunset had arrived and the woods had grown very dark, the trees standing as monuments of shadow all around him. When he finally caught his breath, he straightened and folded his arms around the *Journal of Curious Letters*.

There had to be a way to fix this. There had to be.

Tick knew that Master George somehow tracked what all of his subjects were doing. Tick didn't know what kind of magic or futuristic device accomplished the task, but he knew his actions had been monitored. How else did Mothball and Rutger always know where and how to find him? Even in Alaska! Based on what Paul had said, they went *there* to give him a clue, not the other way around.

Surely Master George cared more about Tick's intent than the mistake of Kayla burning the letter. And Tick's intent was stronger than anything he had felt in his entire life. He wanted to see this through. He wanted to reach the end of the mystery.

He wanted it very, very badly.

Not sure if he'd finally flipped his lid once and for all, Tick screamed at the top of his lungs, belting out several words as loudly as his body could handle.

“MASTER GEORGE, I DIDN'T BURN THE LETTER!”

It hurt his throat and made him cough, but he shouted it a second time anyway.

Drawing in a deep breath through his torn throat, Tick concentrated. He had to do something. He had made his choice long ago to *not* burn the letter. That choice still had to mean something, didn't it? If only he had chosen to take his journal with him to the library instead of leaving it where Kayla could find it.

He felt a funny tickle growing in the pit of his stomach, a reserve of energy he hadn't known was there. A wave of warmth spread up from his stomach into his chest. The air in the woods stilled around him, as if the whole world hushed, waiting for him to make his move.

Tick gritted his teeth. He tapped into that quiet pool of energy, channeling the heat that filled his body and forcing it through his shredded voice box, yelling out for the third time:

“MASTER GEORGE! I . . . DID . . . NOT . . . BURN . . . THE . . . LETTER!”

The woods swallowed up his words, returning only silence. The fire in his belly flickered and then went out, leaving Tick feeling weak and shaky.

He waited, hoping he would see some kind of sign that Master George had heard him. Nothing.

Dejected, throat burning, and not knowing what else he could possibly do, not knowing if what he had done had changed anything at all, he headed for home.

~

Kayla sat in the middle of the living room, hosting a tea party for her three favorite dolls. Humming to herself, she passed out cups of steaming hot tea.

The front door swung open, followed by her very sad-looking brother. His clothes looked dirty, his hair was all messed up, and he was sweating.

What happened to him? she wondered. *He was supposed to be at the library.*

He came into the living room and knelt down beside her, pulling her into a fiercely tight hug. Kayla thought Tick was acting really weird but she finally squeezed back, wondering if he was okay.

“I’m sorry, Kayla,” he said. “I’m really, really sorry I yelled at you like that.” He leaned back from her; his eyes were all wet. “You’re a good girl, you know that? Come here.” He hugged her again, then stood up and headed for the stairs, his head hung low, that strange-looking book with his name on the cover gripped in his right hand.

Halfway up the stairs, he leaned over the railing and repeated himself. “You’re a good girl, Kayla. I’m sorry I yelled at you, okay? I know you didn’t mean to mess up my book.”

Kayla was confused. When had Tick yelled at her? Earlier, he’d been talking to his friends on the computer while she played with her dolls but he hadn’t said anything to her. And she hadn’t touched his book at all. How could she? He had taken it with him when he left for the library.

She and her dollies laughed at the silliness of boys and she poured herself another cup of invisible tea.

~

Tick flopped down on his bed with a groan. How could he know if screaming in the woods had done any good? Was he really going to have to agonize all weekend, waiting, then head to the cemetery on Monday night and hope for the best? Was it really all over?

With a heavy heart he opened up his *Journal of Curious Letters* to torture

himself by studying the spot where Master George's first letter had once been glued, safe and sound. When the front cover flipped over and fell in his lap, Tick looked at something he couldn't understand. He stared for a very long time at the page before him, his mind shifting into overdrive trying to comprehend the message his eyes were frantically sending down the nerve wires to his brain. A message that was impossible.

The first letter was *there*, glued to the page like it had always been, not a burn mark or blemish to be found. It was there! How . . . ?

Master George—or *someone*—had just pulled off the coolest magic trick Tick had ever seen.

~

Kayla had just poured the last cup when she heard loud thumps from upstairs—was somebody *jumping* up there?—followed by happy screams of joy. It was Tick, and he sounded like he'd just received a personal letter from Santa Claus.

What a weirdo, she thought, taking a sip of her tea.

~

Far away, Master George sat upright in his ergonomic chair, staring at the flashing lights of his Command Center. He shook his head, feeling a bit dazed. He'd just been readying himself to . . . do something.

He couldn't remember what exactly.

He'd been thinking about . . . Atticus Higginbottom.

But why? It was as if a bubble in his brain had popped, taking the last few minutes of his life with it. It was downright maddening—he couldn't remember anything. Why was he even sitting in the chair? He only sat here when someone had made a Pick—or if someone had burned their letter. He shook his head. *Had* someone burned their letter? Had *Atticus* burned his letter?

He looked up at the computer screen, counting the purple check marks. No. Everyone was accounted for, the mark by Atticus's name glowing bright and steady. That was good. The special day was coming up quickly and Master George couldn't afford to lose a single member of the group. Especially not Atticus.

I really must be getting old.

Bewildered, he stood up, calling for Muffintops, and thinking how much he'd like a nice pot of peppermint tea.

The Final Preparation

By Sunday night, Tick had heard back from Paul and Sofia about the strange incident with the burned letter and its miraculous reappearance. They were as shocked and clueless as he was about how or why it happened. Paul wasn't shy about expressing his doubt that it had occurred at all. His theory was Tick had been so stressed out about the magic words that he'd experienced one whopper of a bizarre dream.

But Tick knew it was real. He'd even asked Kayla about it and she didn't remember anything about burning the letter. No, Tick knew something magical had happened. Something supernatural. Something miraculous. And he couldn't wait to ask Master George what it might mean.

He sat at the desk in his room, waiting for his dad. The lamp on the desk provided the only light, failing miserably to push back the gloom. They'd planned all weekend to meet at eight o'clock Sunday evening to discuss the Big Day, and to run through the clues one final time. Though they didn't really know what they were planning for, it seemed they'd have only one shot at this. Or rather, *Tick* would have only one shot. The clues had been very clear—he must go alone, unless his dad wanted to drop dead of a heart attack right before the special time.

Tick had just pulled out the *Journal of Curious Letters* when he heard a soft knock at the door. "Come in," he called out.

His dad opened the door and shut it behind him. "Twenty-five hours to go, kiddo."

Tick groaned. "I know. I've been dying for this day to come and now that it's here, I wish we had a week or two more. I'm scared to death."

"Well, at least you're honest." Dad came in and sat on the bed, ignoring the loud creak of the bedsprings, which sounded as if they were about to break. "Most kids would act all tough and say they weren't scared at all."

"Then most kids would be faking it."

His dad clapped his hands together. "Well, we won't have much time to talk tomorrow night before you go, so let's run through everything."

Tick wasn't ready for that yet. "Dad?"

"Yeah?"

"What if . . . whatever I do *takes* me somewhere? Something tells me it will. What if I'm gone a long time?"

His dad's face melted into a look of deep sadness, all droopy eyes and frowns. "Professor, trust me, I've been so worried about all this I can't sleep at night. How could any good father let his son go off to who-knows-where to do who-knows-what and for who-knows how long? *Especiall*y after the dangerous things we've been through." He paused, rubbing his hands together. "But what can I say—I'm nuts? It's hard to believe in all this—but I believe in *you*. I'm taking a huge leap of faith, but I'm gonna let you walk out of this house and down that road"—he pointed out the window—"and off to wherever or whatever it is you've been called to do. It's going to *kill* me, but I'm gonna do it. I'm either the best or the worst dad in history."

A long silence followed. Tick felt something stir within him, a new appreciation for his parents and what they went through worrying about their kids. It couldn't be easy. And now Tick was going to do the worst thing possible to his dad—make him let him go without having a clue what might happen to his only son.

"What about Mom?" Tick finally asked.

His dad looked up from the spot he'd been staring at on the floor. "Now *that* could be a battle."

"What are you going to do? She'd never let me go."

His dad laughed. "That's exactly why you're going to go tomorrow night, and leave the explaining-to-Mom bit to me. Once you're gone, I'll sit her down and spill the beans, every little morsel, from beginning to end. Your mom and I have loved each other for many years, son, and eventually she'll understand why you're doing this, and why you and I feel so strongly about it."

Tick snorted. "Yeah, sometime after she tries to kill you for letting me go."

His dad nodded. "You're probably right, there. Just try to not be gone *too* long and maybe I'll survive."

Tick suddenly had a horrible thought. "What if . . . what if I never—"

His dad held up a hand and shushed Tick loudly. "Stop. Stop, Atticus."

"But—"

"No!" He shook his head vigorously. "You're coming back to me, you hear? These people know what they're doing, and you *will* come back to me. And there won't be another word said about it, is that understood?"

Tick couldn't remember the last time his dad had looked so stern. "Yes, sir."

"Good. Now let's run through those clues."

~

It took a half hour, but they read through each and every one of the Twelve

Clues, studying their words one last time to make sure they hadn't missed anything. But it all seemed to be there, straightforward and solved. Looking back, it had all been pretty easy in a way. The real test seemed to be the endurance and the bravery to keep going.

And, of course, figuring out the magic words, which seemed to be the most important piece of the puzzle. No matter what else he'd done, without those words to say, he felt sure everything would fail.

When they read the twelfth clue, they realized they'd perhaps missed something—a little phrase their mysterious friend had thrown in to verify they'd decoded the magic words correctly.

Listen to the words of Master George—they've been there all along!

And they really *had* been there. If Tick had just known to look at the first letter of the individual clues, he probably would've figured out "Master George" the second they'd learned the name from Norbert up in Alaska.

And so, after thoroughly examining the entire *Journal of Curious Letters* with his dad, Tick felt ready to go.

Tomorrow night, in the cemetery close to downtown, at nine o'clock, he'd show up, alone, in warm clothing, say the words "Master George" with his eyes closed, hands in pockets, then stomp the ground with his right foot ten times.

After that, who knew *what* might happen.

~

Tick went downstairs to check his e-mail before bed, realizing this might be the last chance he had to see if his friends had sent anything. It was already approaching early morning on Monday for Sofia because of the time difference, and Paul was probably already in bed.

What would happen to the others between their turns and his? If they were being taken somewhere, would they just wait around all day until he arrived? Was the staggered time difference on purpose—so Master George wouldn't have to do . . . whatever he was going to do to everyone all at once?

There I go again, Tick thought. Asking a billion questions even though he knew the answer was out of his reach for now. One more day. Twenty-four hours. Then, hopefully, he'd know everything at last.

He logged in to his e-mail and was excited to see messages from both Sofia and Paul. He opened Sofia's, who'd sent hers hours before Paul.

Tick and Paul,

Not much to say now, huh? Don't think Sofia Pacini is in love with

two American boys, but I really hope I see you both tomorrow. I'm sure somehow they're going to bring us magically together. Right?

Good luck. I wish we knew what to expect.

Ciao,

Sofia

For some reason, Tick felt a pang of sadness in his heart, realizing the possibility he might never hear from Sofia again. What if something terrible happened tomorrow? What if only *some* of the people who performed the ritual made it to wherever they were going? Tick told himself to shut up and clicked on Paul's e-mail.

My little buddies,

Hot diggity dog, tomorrow's the day. Let's don't jinx anything.

Hope you're right about us meeting. If so, see ya tomorrow.

Out.

Paul

Tick hit REPLY TO ALL and typed a quick message, knowing his friends might not see it anyway.

Paul and Sofia,

Good luck tomorrow. See you soon. I hope.

Tick

He turned off the computer and stood up, looking over at the fireplace. He thought back to the two events that had happened in the last few months related to the pile of stacked brick, now cold and dark. First, the commitment he'd made to not burn the first letter, to stay in the game—made while kneeling before a fire that could've ended it all. And then the bizarre incident with Kayla and the letter—something that either proved miracles really did happen or Tick had serious mental issues.

With a swarm of butterflies in his belly, Tick finally turned out the lights and headed up the stairs to his room, ready for one last night before the Big Day he'd been preparing for since November.

It took him over two hours to fall asleep.

Part 4

The Barrier Wand

Among the Dead

The next evening—Monday night, May sixth—Tick stood on the front porch with his dad, looking at his digital watch every ten seconds as the sun sank deeper and deeper behind the tree-hidden horizon. The last remnants of twilight turned the sky into an ugly black bruise, a few streaks of clouds looking like jagged scars. It had just turned seven-thirty, and the temperature couldn't possibly be any more perfect for a romp in the town cemetery. Warm, with a slight breeze bearing the strong scents of honeysuckle and pine.

“Are you ready for this?” Dad asked for the fifth time in the last half hour.

“I guess,” Tick replied, tugging at the scarf around his neck, in no mood to offer any smart-aleck response. He felt like he should have done more to prepare, but there was nothing he could think of to *do*. The only real instruction he'd been given in the Twelve Clues was to show up and do a couple of ridiculous cartoon actions.

He did have a backpack full of warm clothing, some granola bars and water, a flashlight, some matches, and—most important—his *Journal of Curious Letters*. He didn't know if he'd be stranded somewhere and suddenly realize he needed to search for clues he'd missed before. Or maybe he needed it to enter the realm of Master George—kind of like a ticket.

Tick was as ready as he possibly could be. He looked at his dad, who seemed ten times more nervous than Tick did, wringing his hands, rocking back and forth on his feet, sweat pouring off his face. “Dad, are you okay?”

“No.” He didn't offer anything else.

“Well . . . there's nothing to worry about. I mean, it's not like I'm going off to war or something. Mothball and Rutger will probably *be* there in the cemetery waiting for me. I'll be fine.”

“How do you know?” Dad asked, almost in a whisper.

“How do I know what?”

“That you're not going off to war?”

“I . . . I don't know.” Tick couldn't *believe* how the minutes dragged by.

“*Many lives are at stake*. That's what the man said, right?”

His dad's voice shook, worrying Tick. But he had no idea what to say. “I promise I'll come back, Dad. No matter what, I promise to come back.”

“I don't know what scares me more,” Dad said. “Letting you run off on your adventure or knowing I have to somehow tell your mom tonight that you

may not come back for awhile. Can you imagine how much that woman's going to *worry*? I may be strung up on a pole when you return."

"Dad, how long have you guys been married?"

"Almost twenty years. Why?"

"Don't you think she trusts you?"

"Well . . . yeah. What are you, a psychologist now?"

Tick shrugged. "No, I just think Mom will understand, that's all. She's always taught me right from wrong, hasn't she? And to make sacrifices for other people—to *serve* other people. I'm just obeying orders, right?"

His dad shook his head in mock disbelief. "Professor, I can't *believe* you're only thirteen years old."

"Thirteen and a half."

His dad barked a laugh, then pulled Tick into a hug, squeezing him tight. "You better be off now, son. Don't want to take any chances of being late, now do you?"

"Nope." Tick returned the hug, trying to fight off tears.

"I love you, Atticus. I'm so proud of what you're doing." His dad pulled back, still holding Tick by both shoulders as he looked into his eyes. "You go and make the Higginbottom family proud, okay? You go out there and fight for what's right, and fight for those who need your help."

"I love you, too, Dad," Tick said, hating how simple and stupid it sounded, but feeling the truth of it in his heart. They hugged again, for a very long minute.

Finally, without any need for additional words, Tick turned from his dad, walked down the stairs of the porch, waved one last time, then headed for his destiny.

He only wished he knew what it was.

~

Yeah, right, Edgar thought as Tick disappeared down the dark road. *Like I'm going to let my only son run off to who-knows-what all alone.*

Edgar turned and hurried back inside where he grabbed the flashlight and binoculars he'd hidden in the closet. Though he really did believe in the whole Master George affair, he was also a father, and he couldn't just let Tick go on his adventure without a little . . . supervision. After all, the clues hadn't banned anyone from being *near* the cemetery, now had they?

"Honey, Tick and I are going for a walk!" he yelled upstairs.

"This late?" her muffled voice called from the bedroom. "Why?"

"Don't worry . . . I'll explain everything when we get back!" He groaned at the prospect.

Before she could reply, Edgar was out the front door and down the porch steps. He'd have to be quick if he wanted to keep up with Tick.

One thing, Edgar vowed as he walked down the driveway. I see one suspicious thing and I'm ending this.

~

By the time Tick reached the forest-lined road that led to town, the sun had made its last glimmer upon the world and gone to bed for the night. Now past eight o'clock, darkness settled on the town of Deer Park, Washington, and Tick felt himself shiver despite the warm and comfortable air.

He couldn't believe it was here. The Big Day. The Big *Night*.

As he walked down the lonely road, the constant buzz of the forest insects broken only occasionally by a passing car, he ran through everything he needed to do in his mind. Even though it seemed so simple, he knew he only had one shot at this and didn't want to mess everything up. Dual feelings of excitement and apprehension battled over his emotional state, making him nauseated and anxious for it to be over, one way or another.

He arrived at the town square and passed the fountain area, where the shooting display of water had been turned off for the night, and made his way down the small one-way lane that led to the old city cemetery. A few people walked about the square, but it mostly seemed vacant and silent, like a premonition that something very bad was about to happen to this quiet and unassuming town.

Quit freaking yourself out, Tick told himself. Everything's going to be fine.

The entrance to the Deer Park Cemetery was a simple stone archway, both sides connected to a cast-iron fence encircling the entire compound. There was no gate, as though those in charge figured if some psycho wanted to visit dead people in the middle of the night, more power to them. As for grave digging, that had gone out of style with Dr. Frankenstein a couple of hundred years ago.

Tick paused below the chipped granite of the arch and looked at his watch, clicking the little light button on the side to see the big digital numbers: 8:37. Just over twenty minutes to go.

The moon, almost full, finally slipped above the horizon, casting a pale radiance upon the hundreds of old-fashioned tombstones; they seemed to glow in the dark around the chiseled letters declaring the names and dates of the dead. Barely defined shadows littered the ground, like holes had opened up throughout the graveyard, zombies having escaped to wreak their nightly havoc.

Once again, Tick shivered. No doubt about it, this was plain creepy.

Hoping it didn't matter exactly *where* he stood when he performed his little

song and dance as long as he was inside the cemetery, Tick stayed close to the entrance, near a tight pack of graves reserved for young children. Tick pulled out his flashlight and flicked it on, examining some of the names while he waited for the last few minutes to pass. Most of the names he didn't know, but he did recognize a few that had been much-publicized tragedies over the last few years. A car accident. Cancer.

Despite his youth, Tick knew there must be nothing in the world so bad as losing one of your kids. Like he'd just swallowed a bag of sand, it hit him then that if anything happened to him tonight, his mom would be devastated. His poor mom. Of course, she'd be so busy yelling at his dad for letting him go in the first place that maybe she wouldn't have the time or energy to hurt properly.

He turned off his flashlight and returned it to his bag. He pulled out the jacket and gloves and put them on, not wanting to take any chances that the instructions to dress warmly had been anything but literal. He tightened his scarf and glanced at his watch. He could see the numbers perfectly in the moonlight.

Five minutes to go.

He put his backpack on the ground, then thought better of it, swinging it back onto his shoulders. If he were about to magically travel somewhere, much better to have everything . . . *attached*.

For the millionth time, he wondered which was stranger—the things he'd been through or the fact that he actually believed there was something *true* behind it all. That he wasn't crazy.

One minute to go.

Tick stared at his watch now, clicking the button that made it show the ticking seconds as well as the hour and minute. As the appointed time grew closer and closer, his heart picked up; sweat beaded all over his body; he felt himself on the verge of throwing up.

Ten seconds.

He quickly put his hands deep into the pockets of his jeans, counting down the last few seconds inside his mind.

Five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . .

Tick closed his eyes and shouted out the words, "MASTER GEORGE!" He stomped the ground below him ten times with his right foot and a quick and cold shiver of excitement went up and down his back.

Tick waited, holding his breath for a long minute. He finally opened his eyes and looked around, but saw that he stood in the exact same spot as when he began. Everything was the same. He waited longer still, hoping something would change around him. Several more minutes passed. Then a half hour. Then an hour. Then two. Desperate, he went through the entire ritual again.

Nothing happened.
Absolutely nothing.

A Familiar Name

Knowing for a fact he'd never felt so depressed in all his life, Tick began the long walk back home. He wished he had a cell phone so he could prevent his dad from telling his mom about everything—now that it was all moot. Now that Tick had failed, and wouldn't be going anywhere after all. At least then he could enjoy the one saving grace of Mom not thinking her husband and only son had gone bonkers.

If the town had been quiet before, it now seemed completely devoid of any life whatsoever. Tick didn't see one person as he walked past the fountain area, and there wasn't a light to be seen anywhere. Even the streetlamps had been extinguished, or they'd burned out. Only the moon shone its pale milky brilliance around the square, making everything look like a much bigger version of the graveyard he'd just left.

Dead and quiet. Full of shadows.

Tick picked up his pace.

When he left the town behind him and started down the long road leading to his house, the creepiness increased. He couldn't explain it, but Tick felt a constant chill in his bones, like something very big and very hungry watched him from the woods. He looked back and forth, scanning both sides of the road, but saw only the tall shadows of the trees, black on black. This time, Tick threw all reservations out the window and simply ran, resolving not to stop until he lay in his bed where he could cry himself to sleep.

As he jostled down the road, concentrating on his feet so he wouldn't trip, Tick had to consciously ignore the feeling that an enormous ghost was right behind him, ready to tap him on the shoulder. Goose bumps broke out all over his body, slick with sweat. He kept running.

He made it to his neighborhood and finally to his house, not slowing until he reached the porch. He stopped, bending over with his hands on his knees as he gulped in air to catch his breath. He didn't want to walk back inside panting like a chased dog. But then the feeling he'd had near the forest returned full force and he ran up the steps to the front door.

The handle rattled when he gripped it, but didn't turn. Locked. He glanced at his watch where he could barely see it was just past eleven o'clock. Tick stepped back, looking for the first time at all the windows on the bottom floor. He should've noticed before—everything was dark, not a single light was on

in the house. Yes, it was late, but his dad was supposed to be telling a very long story to his mom, so surely his parents were still up. They would stay up and watch for him, wouldn't they?

Tick knew his dad kept a spare key to the house hidden in a fake rock placed behind the bushes. He walked back down the porch steps and searched for it, even getting down on his knees to feel around with his hands. But they came up empty, even after scouring the usual area several times.

He couldn't find the key anywhere.

Tick sat back on his heels. *What in the world?*

Frustrated, Tick gave up and walked back to the front door, where he reluctantly pushed the doorbell.

A long moment passed. No one answered. Not a sound came from within the house. Tick, getting more worried by the second, pushed the doorbell again.

Still no response.

Finally, in a panic, he pushed the bell over and over again, hearing the loud ring through the wood of the door. He stopped when he heard a booming shout; it sounded like it came from one of the upstairs bedrooms. The shout was followed by a quick series of loud thumps—someone running down the stairs. Then the door jerked open, revealing a man Tick had never seen before in his life.

“What do you want!” the stranger screamed at the top of his lungs, spittle flying out of his mouth. The man was pale and sickly, so thin he looked like he'd crumble into a pile of sticks at any moment. His ruffled black hair stood up in patches on his head, his face covered in a scraggly beard. Dark, sleep-worn eyes stared at Tick, full of fire and anger. “Who are *you*, you little brat? What do you want?”

Tick felt a sick fear swell inside his stomach. “I'm . . . I'm . . . Atticus Higginbottom. I . . . I live here.”

“*Live* here? What are you, one of those no-good townies? Get out of here!” The man kicked out, missing Tick badly. “Get!” He slammed the door closed.

Tick, his world crashing down around him, turned and ran, the darkness weighing on his shoulders like black stone.

~

Edgar stood in the dark cemetery, his chest rising and falling with heavy breaths. He'd searched everywhere—behind every tombstone, tree, and bush in sight. He didn't know how it could be possible, but what he'd seen from his hiding spot across the road must not have been a trick of his mind.

It had really happened.

What he'd seen had *really* happened.

Tick had disappeared. Like a Las Vegas magic show, Edgar's only son had vanished from sight. There one second, gone the next. No smoke, no sound, nothing.

His son had *disappeared*.

Panicked, Edgar started searching all over again, even though he knew it was useless. Deep down inside, he tried to convince himself Tick was okay, that they'd known something like this would happen. This was what they'd been preparing for all along! Edgar told himself that Tick was safe now, in some other world or realm, learning how he could help save the lives that were depending on him. Where had all the good feelings about this whole mess gone to? He and Tick had devoted themselves to this cause, believing in its purpose.

But it hadn't seemed real until the moment he'd seen his son vanish. And now Edgar didn't know if he could ever forgive himself for letting Tick go. If something happened to his boy . . .

Dejected, a sinking weight of despair filling his stomach, Edgar finally gave up and headed for home. He was about to have a very long night explaining things to his wife.

~

Tick didn't know what else to do—where else to go—except back to the cemetery. Something *must* have happened when he'd performed the ritual—something horrible. He'd messed it up somehow, sending him to the wrong place or time. He thought back to the crazy things Mr. Chu had told him about quantum physics. Where *was* he?

Once he left his neighborhood, he couldn't run another step. He slowed to a walk, breathing heavily, constantly looking behind to make sure no one was following him—especially the creepy man who'd answered the door at his house.

It was a weird feeling to suddenly feel like the only place you've ever lived is no longer yours, occupied instead by some monster of a man willing to kick a little kid. Tick had run the gamut of emotions in the last hour—excitement that the special day was here, disappointment when seemingly nothing had happened, dejection and despair, panic and fear that his home wasn't his home anymore. Now he just felt numb as he slowly made his way back to town. To the cemetery. It was the only place where he could hope to find some answers.

He tried to take in his surroundings as he walked, searching for signs that other things about his hometown were different than what he was used to. But the darkness was too great and all he saw were shadows hiding other

shadows. He almost pulled out his flashlight, but thought better of it—who knew what lurked in this new nightmare. He wanted to remain as hidden as possible.

As he entered the town square for the third time that night, he realized the lack of lights couldn't be a coincidence—the place was a haven for nothing but ghosts and ghouls. Where was he? What had happened to this place that should feel so familiar but instead seemed so alien? His heart hurting, his body exhausted, Tick picked up the pace again and quickly ran across the waterless fountain area and down the small road until he reached the entrance to the cemetery.

He didn't know how he'd missed it before, but Tick saw that more than half of one side of the stone archway had crumbled and fallen to the ground into a pile of dusty rubble. Dozens of rods from the iron fence were missing or bent, looking like the mangled teeth of a horrific robot. The moon vanished entirely behind a large bank of clouds, casting everything into sinister shadows. The tombstones seemed bigger, less defined, leaning at odd angles.

Tick rubbed his hands over his arms, standing in the same place where he'd performed the magic-words-and-foot-stomping ritual. He finally realized what he was feeling.

Terror. Absolute, shrill, make-your-hair-stand-on-end terror.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a light come on.

He sucked in a quick intake of air as he turned to see a small spotlight shining on a single tombstone, about thirty yards deeper into the cemetery grounds. Compared to the heavy darkness around him, it seemed like the sun itself had changed its mind and come back for a nighttime visit. Realizing he hadn't seen a spark of electricity since leaving for his house and returning, Tick felt like he was witnessing some kind of magic trick.

Curious, he walked toward the light, ignoring the fear constricting his chest.

He stepped around several large graves, almost tripping on a stone border around a particularly wide one. He kept his eyes riveted on the bright spot, scared it might be a trap, but not knowing where else to go. As he got closer, he saw that the light came from a large flashlight, sitting alone in front of a grave. He looked around the area, squinting his eyes to see if any monsters or zombies were hiding in the shadows, readying themselves to jump out and eat him.

The light hurt his vision, and he knew if someone was out there, he wouldn't be able to see them. He focused on the brightly displayed tombstone, now close enough that he could read the etched words, dusty indentations on an old black-gray slab of granite.

Everything in his mind immediately vanished, all fear and thoughts

washed away in the disbelief of what he saw before him. Tick fell to his knees, unable to take his eyes away from the words on the grave marker.

Tick looked at the dates.

According to the tombstone, he'd been dead for three years.

Chapter 38

~

Sitting Down



Before Tick could completely process the fact he was looking at his own grave, he heard a noise behind him. He twisted around, still on his knees, and for a split second thought he saw the reincarnation of Frankenstein's Monster. A scream formed in the back of Tick's throat. But it quickly fell mute when he realized the figure was someone very familiar, standing just a few feet away,

towering over him.

Mothball.

Tick quickly stood up, relieved to see a familiar face, the questions flying out of his mouth before he had his feet under him. “Mothball, what’s happening? Where am I? How did—”

The tall woman held up a hand. “Best the little sir keep quiet for a moment, let yer tall friend do the talkin’ for a bit.” She stepped forward and bent over to pick up her flashlight, grunting with the effort. “Not every day ya get to see yer own tombstone, now is it? Downright spooky, it is.”

“Mothball, what’s going on?” Tick felt tears forming in his eyes now that the initial shock of seeing his name on the granite slab had settled into a stark reality.

“What’s going on?” Mothball repeated. “I’ll tell ya what’s going on. The little sir did it, he did. Solved Master George’s riddles, made it quite nicely. Got lots of learnin’ to do now, ya do. Hope yer mind’s still got some empty spots.”

Tick couldn’t shake the sick feeling in his stomach. “Mothball, why does this grave have my name on it? Who’s that crazy guy living in my house? Where is my family?” His voice broke on that last word, and he suddenly wondered if he really wanted to know the answer.

“One question at a time, if yer wantin’ any answers.” She pointed down at the tombstone. “There’s a fine reason that there piece of rock has yer name on it.” She paused. “Yer dead here, little sir. Dead as a mouse that’s got no heart, you are. Smell worse than Rutger’s feet I’d wager.” She offered Tick a smile, but he was in no mood to laugh.

“What are you talking about? How can I be . . . dead? I’m standing here talking to you.”

“I take it back, then. Yer *Alterant* is dead—that’s what I meant.” Mothball sighed and fidgeted, looking as uncomfortable as a vampire in a cathedral.

“An Alter-what? Mothball, *please* just tell me what’s going on.”

Mothball stepped closer to Tick, put one of her huge arms around his shoulder. Her flashlight was pointed at the ground, but it still illuminated her face enough to show creases of concern in her temples and brow, her eyes full of something indescribable—sorrow or compassion. “Perk yer ears, Master Tick, methinks I need to tell ya something.”

Tick stared up at her, waiting. “What is it?”

“Life’s a bit harder than you’ve ever known, it is. *Different*, too. When ya finally meet Master George, yer going to learn things that’d be a mighty bit hard for a grown-up to hear, much less a young’un like yourself. How it all works—the whys and hows and whatnot—better be leaving to me boss, I will. But I can tell ya one thing before we shove off.” She paused, looking away

from Tick into the darkness of the graveyard.

“Yeah?” Tick prodded.

“This . . . place. If things had been different for you, Tick—if different choices had been chosen, different paths taken—well, that really could be yer little self under this here pile of dirt. This version of the world is fragmented, as Master George calls it. It’s weak, splintering, *fading*. All words I don’t use much, I’ll admit it. But we wanted ya to see it, to feel what it’s like to see yer own self dead as a stump.”

Tick shook his head. “But I don’t get it, Mothball. Are you saying this is another version of our world? That I did something here that ended up with me dead?”

“No, no, no, you’ve got it all wrong. I’m not saying yer dead because of anything ya did directly—at least, not for sure. Probably never know, we will.” She took her arm away, throwing it up in the air, frustrated. “Oh, this is rubbish—need to get a move on, we do.”

“Wait!” Tick reached out and grabbed Mothball’s shirt. “What about my family. Are they okay?”

Mothball knelt down on the ground, bringing her eyes level with Tick’s. “They’re right as rain, little sir. You don’t have to worry about them at’all. See what I’m tryin’ to tell ya is that the choices we make in this life can lead to things we’d never s’pect to have anything to do with us. Realities can be created and destroyed.” She gestured with her head to Tick’s tombstone. “That little feller might ruddy well be you for sure, he could. But ya just might have the power within yer beatin’ heart to make sure it doesn’t happen. That’s what it’s all about, really.”

Some of Tick’s anxiety and fear had vanished. Though he didn’t have a clue what Mothball was talking about, he felt . . . *moved*, which made him feel very adult. “Mothball, when do I get to actually understand what it is you’re talking about?”

Mothball smiled as she stood back on her feet. “Not much for speeches, I’ll admit it. By the looks of it, you’d rather listen to a croakin’ toad than hear me go on a bit. Righto, off we go.” She moved away from the tombstone and walked deeper into the scattered graves of the cemetery, the beam of her flashlight bobbing up and down with each step.

Tick fell in line behind her, having to take two steps for every one of hers, adjusting his scarf and backpack as he went. “When you say ‘off we go,’ where exactly are we off-we-going *to*?”

“Ah, Master Tick,” she said over her shoulder, “glad we got the bologna-and-cheese talk out the way, I am. Now’s time for the fun part. Hope yer excited.”

“I am, trust me. Anything to get away from this place.”

Mothball laughed, a booming chuckle that seemed sure to wake up a few dead people. “Don’t like the deadies, do ya? That’ll change, it will. Most times it takes a place like this to go off winking, it does.”

“Winking? What’s that?”

“Find out soon enough, ya will. Ah, here we are.” Mothball stopped, then turned around to face Tick. She shone her flashlight on a small patch of unmarked grass. “Have a nice sit-down, we will.” When Tick didn’t move, she gestured for him to sit. “Right here, chop-chop.”

“Why do we have to sit down?” Tick asked as he sat cross-legged in the exact spot where she’d shone the light.

Mothball sat across from him, folding up her huge legs underneath her. “No offense, lad, but methinks I’ve had enough of yer questions for now. Save them for Master George, and we’ll all be a mite happier indeed.”

Tick knew something amazing was about to happen, and his insides swelled with butterflies, like the last moment before a roller coaster shoots down its first gigantic hill. “Whatever you say, Mothball. I’ll shut up.”

“Now there’s a line I’d wish old Rutger’d learn to say. That wee little fat man could talk the ears off a mammoth, he could.”

Tick laughed, but didn’t say anything, keeping his promise.

“All right, that about does it, I’d say,” Mothball said to herself as she settled her body, growing still. “Just keep yourself nice and comfy there, lad, and good old Master George will wink us away any minute.”

There was that word again. *Wink*. Tick almost asked about it, but kept quiet, nervously pulling on his scarf.

“Feel a little tingle on yer neck and back, you will,” Mothball whispered. “Things’ll change then, right quick. Try to keep yer pants on straight and don’t go screamin’ like a baby or you might just drown. Come to an understanding, have we?”

Tick nodded, his thrill of anticipation suddenly turning a little sour.
Drown?

Before he could dwell on what she meant, he felt cold pinpricks along the back of his spine, a quick wave that he might not have noticed if he hadn’t been waiting for it.

Then, as promised, everything changed.

In less time than it took to form a single conscious thought, Tick found himself thousands of miles from the graveyard. He sat in the same position as before, but now he was sitting inside a small raft, bobbing up and down in the middle of a dark and choppy sea of black water.

And it was raining.

A Lot of Water

Nothing happened to mark their transportation from one place to another. No booming alarm, no bright flash of light, no movement of any kind. Tick and Mothball simply went from sitting across from each other on a small patch of grass in the middle of a cemetery to sitting across from each other on a raft in the middle of the ocean.

Heavy, cold rain fell from a sky Tick couldn't see, pelting his entire body, sluicing down the inward sides of the small boat and forming a standing pool of water. Mothball still had her flashlight fully ablaze; the light cast an eerie cone of radiance revealing countless pellets of rain and a small circle of angrily churning waters just a few feet from where they floated. The raft rocked back and forth, up and down, already making Tick's stomach ill.

Mothball shifted her body until she was on her knees, then shone the flashlight somewhere behind her. Tick leaned to his right to catch a glimpse of what she was looking at and saw a huge structure floating nearby, rigid and unmoved by the uneasy sea. He couldn't make out much as Mothball scanned the area with her light, but it appeared to be a building of some sort, a huge square made out of silvery metal walls, rivets and bolts scattered all over its slick and shiny surface. It seemed impossible that it could be a large boat or ship. It was just *there*, solid, like its foundation went all the way to the ocean bottom.

"Won't be but a moment!" Mothball yelled over her shoulder, working at something with her large arms and hands.

"Where are we?" Tick screamed back, several drops of heavy rain flying into his mouth, almost gagging him.

Mothball turned and looked at him, her hair and face soaked. "Middle of the ocean, we are!"

"Thanks a lot—figured that one out on my own!" Tick slicked his rain-soaked hair out of his eyes.

Instead of replying, Mothball set her right foot against the edge of the raft and pulled on something, grunting with the effort. After a second of hesitation, a bright light suddenly flared against the darkness of the storm, accompanied by the heavy groan of bending metal and the scrape of rusty hinges. Mothball had opened an enormous door of solid steel that led inside the boxy structure. Tick caught a glimpse of a long hallway lined with cables

and wiring and thick ductwork.

“Made it, you did!” Mothball yelled into his ear as she grabbed him by the shoulders, helping him across the unstable raft and toward the opening. “You’ll be speaking directly with Master George in a moment. Up ya go!” With a playful roar she picked Tick up and half-threw him through the open doorway.

He landed with a squishy flump, scrambling to stand up. Every inch of his body drenched, Tick rubbed at his arms, shivering from the uncomfortable, cold feeling of wearing wet clothes. His scarf drooped off his neck, soggy and seeming like it weighed a hundred pounds. He swung his backpack off his shoulders and placed it on the metal grid that made up the hallway floor.

Mothball crawled inside and closed the heavy door behind her. It slammed shut with a loud boom that rattled the entire structure. “Nasty business, that,” she muttered as she climbed to her feet, stooping to avoid hitting her head on the low obstacles that ran along the ceiling. “Don’t you worry, Master George is sure to have a roaring fire lit. Come on, now.”

She started down the hallway and Tick followed, barely able to contain his anticipation of meeting the man behind all the mystery.

Mothball rounded a corner and came upon a stout wooden door. Tick thought it seemed out of place inside a huge metal box floating on the ocean. She paused, then rapped three times with her large knuckles. “Got the last one, I did!” she yelled through the dark oak.

Muffled footsteps sounded from the other side, then the click of a latch. The door swung wide open and Tick’s five senses almost crashed and burned trying to take in everything at once.

Beyond the open doorway was an enormous room that looked like it had been plucked out of an ancient king’s castle and magically transported inside the metal building. Fancy, fluffy, *comfortable*-looking furniture sat atop lush carpets and rugs; the walls were covered in dark wooden bookshelves, complete with hundreds of leather-bound books; a massive brick fireplace cast a warm and flickering glow upon the whole room as the fire within it roared and crackled and spit. Several people were in the room, scattered amongst the plush furniture.

Tick recognized Sofia at once, sitting on an overstuffed chair next to the fire; when their eyes met, she stood and waved. Next to her was a couch where a tall, dark-skinned boy sat, grinning from ear to ear. That had to be Paul. An Asian boy sat next to him, short dark hair framing his angry, scrunched-up face. Tick thought he looked like he’d just been told he hadn’t passed a single one of his classes at school. Rutger was there, too, his little round body perched atop a pile of cushions. He leaned back, clasping his stubby hands behind his head like he owned the place.

And finally, standing by the door, his hand still on the inside handle, was a man dressed in the fanciest suit Tick had ever seen, black and pinstriped, a long golden chain marking where his pocket watch hid for the moment. His face was puffy and red, like he'd just walked ten miles through a freezing wind. A round pair of glasses perched on his nose, making his dark eyes seem two times bigger than they were. His balding scalp was red and slightly flaky. Tick thought he looked a little odd and a little anxious, but somehow nice all the same.

“Master George?” he said, wincing when it came out more as a croaky whisper than anything else.

The man smiled, revealing slightly crooked teeth. “Indeed, my good man. Master George, at your service.” He bowed his head and held out a hand, which Tick accepted and shook, his confidence and ease growing by the second.

“Nice to meet you,” Tick said, remembering his manners.

“Likewise, boy, likewise.” He stepped back and swept his arm in a wide gesture, as if revealing the warm room as the grand prize on a game show. “Welcome to our first meeting with new members in more than twenty years.”

“Members?” Tick asked.

“Why, yes, old chap—or, should I say, *young* chap?” Master George chuckled, then turned it into a cough when no one else laughed. “Ah, yes, well—welcome to your future, my dear boy. Welcome to the Realitant Headquarters.”

Tick entered the room, knowing he would never, ever be the same.

Master George

Have a sit-down,” Master George said as he ushered Tick toward a chair between the fire and where Rutger rested on top of his pile of cushions. “The fire should dry your clothing in no time. We’re simply delighted you could make it. We were beginning to worry a bit. The rest of these poor chaps had to listen to Rutger’s interminable stories and recollections all day—quite a tasking thing to do, I assure you.” He winked at Tick as he gestured for him to sit.

Tick sat down with a squish, looking over at Sofia. She waved again, then shrugged her shoulders as if to say, “What in the world have we gotten ourselves into?” Tick smiled back at her, wishing they could talk, but it seemed as though their host had a specific agenda and was eager to begin.

Master George stepped in front of the blazing fire, rubbing his hands together as he took in each person there with a lingering gaze. “We’ve got quite a lot to do in the next few hours, and more explaining than I daresay I look forward to. I haven’t the faintest idea where to start.” He pulled out a silk handkerchief and wiped his brow. “Look at that, would you? Already sweating and I’ve yet to say anything of importance.”

“Maybe that’s because you’re standing in front of a *fire*,” Rutger quipped, the simple effort of talking throwing his balance off. He tumbled off the pillows and flopped to the floor. “Ouch.”

“’Tis going to be a long night, it is,” Mothball muttered from where she stood in the back, arms folded.

“Rutger, *behave* yourself,” Master George commanded, his face reddening for just a second before he replaced his irritation with a forced smile. “Now, let us begin, shall we? First things first—a quick go around the room for introductions.” He motioned to Sofia. “Ladies first?”

“Okay,” she said, seemingly pleased by the attention. She stood up and waved at everyone staring at her. “My name is Sofia Pacini, and I’m from Italy. I’m almost thirteen years old, and my family is famous for making spaghetti and several sauces. It’s the best in the world, and if you haven’t heard of us, you’ve got real problems.” She looked at Master George. “Anything else?”

“Oh, no, that’s very nice, thank you very much. Next?” He motioned with his eyes to the boy who must be Paul.

“Uh, yeah . . . do I really have to stand up?”

Master George said nothing, but shook his head.

“Great. My name is Paul Rogers, and I’m from the U.S. of A.—Florida to be exact. I’ve been chatting with Sofia and Tick on the Internet, so it’s good to finally see you guys in person. I love surfing and playing the piano. I don’t have a clue why I’m here, but I’m busting to find out. Oh, and I’m fourteen years old—way older than these kids.” He pointed at Tick and Sofia.

“A delight, Paul, thank you. Mister Sato?” Master George nodded toward the Asian boy sitting next to Paul.

“I will say nothing,” the boy answered in a curt voice, folding his arms for dramatic effect.

“Pardon me?” Master George asked, then exchanged looks with Mothball and Rutger. Something about his expression told Tick that Sato’s actions weren’t exactly a surprise.

“I trust no one,” Sato replied. He looked around the room, pointing at each person in turn. “Not you, not you, not you, none of you. Until I know everything, I will say nothing.” He nodded as if proud of himself for being such a jerk.

Tick glanced at Sofia, who made a pig face, pushing her nose up with her index finger and sticking out her tongue. Tick had to cover his mouth to keep from laughing out loud.

“Well,” Master George struggled for words, “that’s . . . splendid.” He rubbed his hands together again. “I believe we all know my trusted friends Mothball and Rutger quite well by now, so Mister Higginbottom, please—tell us a bit about yourself before we begin our very long discussion.”

Tick shifted in his seat. “Uh, yeah, I’m Atticus Higginbottom, but everyone calls me Tick. I’m from the east side of Washington state, I’m thirteen years old, I like science and chess”—he winced inside at how nerdy that made him sound—“and I’m excited to find out why we’ve been . . . brought here.”

“Amen,” Paul chimed in.

“You better talk fast,” Sato said. “I want to know right now why you kidnapped me and brought me here.”

“Kidnap?” Mothball asked, almost spitting. “What, left yer brain in Japan, ’ave you?”

“I only followed the instructions out of curiosity. Then you kidnapped me. I demand to be taken home.”

What a jerk. He’s going to ruin everything, Tick thought. He looked at Sofia and rolled his eyes. She nodded, frowning in Sato’s direction.

“Well, then,” Master George said, his enthusiasm dampened. “Jolly good

beginning this is.”

“Just ignore the kid,” Rutger said to Master George. He turned toward the disgruntled Japanese boy. “Sato, hear him out. If you don’t like it, we’ll send you right back where you came from. Now stick a sock in it.”

Sato’s face reddened, but he didn’t say anything, huffing as he leaned back in his seat.

“And on that note,” Master George said, trying his best to regain his composure, smiling broadly. “We shall begin. Rutger, would you please bring some victuals from the pantry? These good people must be famished.”

Paul clapped loudly and whistled. Sofia, then Tick, joined him.

Master George waited until Rutger had scuttled out a side door. “Let me begin by saying how proud each of you should be of your accomplishment of simply being here today. I sent letters to hundreds of young people, and you four are the only ones who made it this far. Quite an accomplishment indeed. Especially considering the dreadful things I sent to test your mettle.”

Tick perked up at this, remembering his conversation with Mothball and Rutger about how sorry Master George had been about the Alaska incident, which made it seem like he *wasn’t* as sorry about the other scary things that had happened—like the Gnat Rat and the Tingle Wraith. “You mean . . .” Tick began, but then stopped, wondering if he was out of line.

“Yes, Mister Higginbottom,” Master George answered, seemingly not bothered by the interruption. “It was I, er, we who sent some of the things that must’ve scared you greatly. Objects like the Gnat Rat and Tingle Wraith are much easier to wink to and fro than humans, fortunately. But none of them could or would have hurt you beyond any easy repair, mind you. But the man in Alaska—the one sent by Mistress Jane—now that was an entirely different affair, I assure you. I do apologize for that bit of trouble.”

“Wait a minute,” Paul said. “Mothball here told me my brain would turn to mush if I heard the Tingle Wraith’s Death Siren for more than thirty seconds.”

“A slight exaggeration on her part,” Master George answered with a look of chagrin. “Because of your still-developing brains, you would’ve recovered in no more than three or four weeks—albeit with a lingering headache and blurred vision. And a certain bodily odor we can’t quite figure out . . .”

“You sent those awful things to attack us?” Sofia asked. “But why?”

“Yeah, man,” Paul chimed in. “That’s just not right.”

“Finally,” Sato said. “You people are starting to see why I am so angry.”

“Why would you want to hurt us?” Tick asked, glaring at Master George, sudden confusion and hurt constricting his chest.

Paul’s face looked like someone had just kicked him in both shins. “Dude, how can we trust you now?”

“Now please,” Master George pleaded, holding up both hands in front of him. “We haven’t even been about our business yet, and already we lose our focus!” His voice rose with every word. “Must I treat you like children? Are you no different from the hundreds who didn’t make it nearly as far as you? If so, you may all leave this instant! If you can’t handle a couple of cheap tricks like the Gnat Rat, then you’ve no place being here!”

Tick stared at Master George, surprised he could change from a nice old Englishman to an angry ogre so quickly. The others seemed as dead silent and awestruck as he felt.

“This is no *game*,” Master George continued, his face more flushed than before, though Tick would’ve thought it impossible. “Everything I’ve done was meant to bring to me the strongest, the bravest, the cleverest. I let no excuses lie on the table—none at all. If you couldn’t persuade your mum and dad to let you come, then you’d be off. If you couldn’t bring yourself to follow such silly instructions, then you’d be off. If you let a little thing like two days of horrendous bee stings bother you, then you’d be off. Now, you’re here and I’m ready to begin instruction. Have I made a *mistake*?”

Master George shouted the last word, folding his arms and staring around the room, daring someone to respond. A full minute passed, the crackling fire the only sound in the room. Even Sato seemed impressed. Tick felt scared to swallow or breathe, afraid of how Master George would take it.

“All right, then,” the Englishman finally said. “If from this point forward you’d be so kind as to act like the brave souls I meant to gather, we can move on.” He paused, pretending to brush unseen dust off his suit jacket. “Now, you may be wondering why I sent letters only to young people such as yourself. Am I correct?”

No one said a word, afraid to rock the boat again.

“Come on, now,” Master George said. “Only *children* would be afraid to speak up.”

Everyone spoke at once at this remark, but Paul drowned out the others. “Never thought about it, actually. But now you mention it, that’s a good question that I think I’d like to know the answer to very much. Uh, sir. Master.” He cleared his throat. “Master George.”

“Much better, much better. I knew you blokes from America were smart. Now—”

He was interrupted by a loud noise from the side. Rutger shuffled through the door balancing two silver trays stacked with enormous plates of steaming hot food in his arms.

“Who’s hungry?” he announced loudly. “I’ve prepared generous portions for everyone.” Wonderful smells wafted across the room.

He started handing out plates and utensils, almost dropping the entire load

with every step. “We’ve got roasted duck, thrice-baked potatoes, succulent legs of lamb with basil and—my favorite—roast beef. Plus a slice of cherry cheesecake.” Panting, he put down a plate for himself then handed the last one to Tick. “Eat up!”

Tick needed no urging. After a quickly muttered thank you, he dug in as he balanced the plate on his lap. The food was tender and hot, juicy and rich. It may have been his hunger, but everything on the plate seemed the most delicious stuff he’d ever put in his mouth. By the sounds of smacking lips and slurping fingers from around the room, he wasn’t alone in that regard.

“Well,” Master George said, “I’m glad to see we still have our appetites. Now, if I may, I will continue our discussion. About the letters—the reason I wrote only to youngsters is because what you’re about to hear would never be believed by a cantankerous old grown-up. They’re far too set in their ways, thinking they’re all smart and such. No, I needed to bring in a new batch of recruits, and I knew they must be young and spry, ready to take on the world, as it were.”

“Uh, Master George?” Rutger said through a large mouthful of food.

“Yes, Rutger?”

“Don’t you think we should, uh, move on and tell them *why* they’re here? Time’s a wasting.”

Master George snapped his fingers and waved his hands in the air. “Yes, yes, you’re right, of course. Thank you, on we go.” He folded his hands in front of him and looked down at the floor. “I shall now tell you everything, from beginning to end.”

And so Master George began his story, the craziest, wackiest, most bizarre thing Tick had ever heard. And he loved every minute of it.

The Tale of the Realities

What each of you considers the world in which you have always lived and breathed,” Master George began, “is not exactly what you may think. It is in fact much, much more. Your world, the place where you were born, is what we call Reality Prime. It is the first and greatest version of the universe with which you are familiar. However, several decades ago, a group of scientists discovered great mysteries in the field of study we affectionately call the *kyoopy*.”

Kyoopy! Tick thought. *The Q.P.! Quantum physics.*

“Now,” Master George continued, “we haven’t the time or need to explore the deep scientific mumbo-jumbo, but suffice it to say the scientists discovered that alternate versions of the universe exist in harmony and congruity with the world in which we grew up. The reality we all know so well is not alone—there are *other* Realities. Parallel universes that have evolved and developed differently from Reality Prime because of vastly significant events that literally broke them apart from ours.”

“Master George,” Paul interrupted. “I consider myself one smart dude, but this seems crazy.”

Just let him talk, Tick thought as he took his last bite. He set the empty plate on the floor at his feet.

“Don’t worry, Mister Rogers. Give me time, and all will become as clear as my mum’s fine crystal.”

“Sounds like a bunch of lies so far,” Sato said, almost under his breath, but loud enough for everyone to hear.

Master George ignored him. “There is an energy force in the universe that binds and controls all the Realities, a greater force than any the laws of physics have ever attempted to define. This power is the lifeblood of the *kyoopy*, and only a handful of scientists even knows it exists. We call this power the Chi’karda, and everything we’ll be about depends on it. Everything.”

“What is it?” Tick asked, remembering that Mothball had once said the word to him.

“Rutger?” Master George asked. “What do I always say about the Chi’karda?”

Everyone turned to look at the short man, lounging on his pillows. “You

always say, ‘When it comes to individual destiny, there is no power greater in the universe than the conviction of the human soul to make a choice.’” He rolled his eyes as if he didn’t want to be bothered anymore.

“Precisely,” Master George said in a loud whisper, holding up his index finger. “Choice. Conviction. Determination. Belief. *That* is the true power within us, and its name is Chi’karda. It is the immeasurable force that controls what most scientists of the world do not yet understand. Quantum physics.”

“So what does this . . . Chi’karda thing have to do with the alternate universes?” Sofia asked.

“It’s what *creates* them, my dear girl,” Master George answered. “It’s happened throughout history, when choices have been made of such magnitude they literally shake the world and split apart the fabric of space and time, creating two worlds where there used to be only one, running parallel to each other within the complex intricacies of the kyoopy. What do you think causes earthquakes?”

“Wow,” Paul breathed. “Serious?”

“Quite right, sir, quite right. The creation and destruction of alternate worlds through the power of the Chi’karda has been known to trigger great and terrible quakes. *Wow*, indeed. Allow me to give you an example that will explain it much better, so you can throw out the hard words and difficult phrases. Everyone, close your eyes, please.” He motioned with his hands, urging Tick and the others to obey.

Tick closed his eyes.

“I want you to picture in your mind an enormous tree,” Master George said. “Its trunk is ten feet wide, with twelve thick branches, er, branching off, breaking up into tinier and tinier limbs until they are barely measurable. Can you picture it?”

A scatter of mumbled yeses sounded across the room, even from Mothball and Rutger.

“The trunk of that tree is Reality Prime, the version of the world in which you were born and have lived your whole lives. The main branches of the tree are very established *alternate* Realities that have stood the test of time and survived, each one different from Reality Prime in significant ways. From there, the smaller and smaller branches are weak and crumbling Realities, *fragmented* Realities, most of them heading for the day when they will vanish altogether or be absorbed into another Reality. We had each of you visit one of those fragmented Realities before you came here, to give you a bit of understanding at what they can be like.

“The Realitants are a group of explorers devoted to charting and documenting the main branches of this tree for the sake of science and in hopes that one day we can better understand the makeup of the universe and

how it works. And to, er, protect Reality Prime from potential, er, unforeseen dangers.”

Master George cleared his throat loudly, and Tick’s eyes flew open. Master George’s hands gave the slightest twitch at his sides. “Until recently, we had fully charted twelve main Realities, and everything was going just splendid—there’d even been talk that perhaps someday we’d discover the perfect Reality—a utopia if you will. But the reason you are here today is because quite the opposite has occurred. One of our own, a traitor like the world has never known, has discovered a Thirteenth Reality, and very bad things are about to happen. Very bad things indeed.”

“I knew it,” Sato grumbled.

“What’s in the Thirteenth Reality?” Tick asked. “What’s so bad about it?”

“Oh, Mister Higginbottom, it is quite a hard thing to talk about. With every other Reality, we’ve had mostly positive, fascinating experiences. For example, there’s the Fifth Reality, home of our dearest Mothball. There, circumstances somehow led to a drastic change in the gene pool, where everyone became taller and stronger, evolving into a much different society than the one you know so well. Then, of course, there’s the Eleventh, where Rutger was born. As you can see, they, er, had quite the, er, *opposite* effect in their Reality.”

Everyone looked at Rutger, who patted his big belly as if it were his most prized possession.

Master George cleared his throat again and moved on quickly. “There’s the Fourth, perhaps the most fascinating Reality of them all. Their world is much more advanced than ours, the technology revolution occurring much sooner there than it did in Reality Prime. Going there is much like traveling to the future—quite fascinating indeed. It’s where I acquired the Gnat Rat and the Tingle Wraiths.”

Tick’s jaw dropped open.

The Gnat Rat. Manufactured by Chu Industries.

That explains it, he thought. *No wonder I couldn’t find anything on them.* Mr. Chu couldn’t have had anything to do with the company after all—it was in another Reality.

“But I haven’t answered your question, have I?” Master George said, looking uncomfortable. “You most clearly asked me about the *Thirteenth* Reality, and here I am, doing everything in my power to avoid answering you.”

“Well?” Sofia asked.

“What? Ah, yes, the question. The Thirteenth Reality. I’m afraid this new place is . . . quite extraordinary. You see, for the first time, a Reality has been discovered in which . . . oh, poppycock, this is difficult to say.”

“Go ahead and say it,” Mothball urged from the back. “These kids can take it, they can.”

“Yes, yes, you’re quite right, Mothball.” Master George straightened his shoulders. “The Thirteenth Reality has a mutated and frightening version of the Chi’karda that simply chills my bones to think about. It is most certainly the source of every frightening myth, dangerous legend, or terrifying nightmare that has ever leaked into the stories and tales of the human race.”

“A . . . *mutated* version of the Chi’karda?” Paul repeated. “What in the world does that mean?”

Master George’s brow creased as he frowned. “Remember what Rutger told all of you about the sheer power of the Chi’karda? The Thirteenth has somehow turned that power of pure creation into something completely different. Something frightening.”

“But why?” Paul pushed. “What does that *mean*?”

Master George’s face paled. “It means that we have discovered a Reality that contains the closest thing to—oh, I hate to even utter the word—but it contains the closest thing to *magic* we have ever seen. And not the good kind of magic like in your storybooks. No, this is a very real, very *dark* power. And if it isn’t contained, if it somehow escapes from the Thirteenth Reality, everything will be lost.”

The Doohickey

Magic?” Sofia said. “That sounds fun.”

“You’re talking, like, abracadabra and all that stuff?” Paul chimed in. “Wizards and broomsticks?”

“No, no, no, nothing of the sort,” Master George replied, his face scrunched up in annoyance. “This is real—perfectly real—and it’s all explained by the laws of science, particularly the kyoopy, quantum physics. It’s all a matter of unique Chi’karda manipulation. In the Thirteenth Reality, though, it’s been mutated into something far more powerful and horrific. And it can be controlled by someone who understands the nature of it.”

“What can it do?” Tick asked.

“Well, it can make things fly, create horrible beasts, the like. What all of you would consider magic, which is why I used the word—though any scientist would despise such ridiculous nomenclature. This is real, this is *science*. And while it’s not unique to the Thirteenth, it is there that they’ve learned how to twist it, how to use it much more powerfully.”

“What do you mean?” Paul asked. “The same power exists in other places?”

“Why, yes, of course. It’s even here in Reality Prime—though thankfully not the dark and sinister version that exists in the Thirteenth. Ever heard of *luck*?”

Master George continued, excited, not bothering to wait for anyone to answer. “The Chi’karda is essentially the power of conviction, of belief, of strong choices. There have been instances where wonderful things have occurred, where the tiny world of quantum physics has fundamentally *changed* because of an overwhelming, powerful display of Chi’karda. Some call it a lucky break, good fortune, a windfall, a crazy coincidence. Oh, it’s happened plenty, but in the Thirteenth, the Chi’karda has mutated into something hideous.”

“Man,” Paul said. “That is just plain awesome.”

“*Awesome*?” Master George asked, his tone suggesting he felt exactly the opposite. “I assure you, there’s nothing awesome about it once you know what Mistress Jane intends to do with this dark Chi’karda.”

“Who is this Mistress Jane?” Sofia asked, glancing at Tick then at Master George. “Norbert told us she went looking for you in Alaska. He said she

threatened him.”

Master George’s face grew dark. “Mistress Jane is the most foul, despicable, wretched creature to ever walk the folds of the Realities. She was once one of us, someone who worked toward understanding and unity. But she betrayed us for hopes of glory and power. We have many spies in her camp, and we’re certain she plans to annihilate the Reality system in its entirety. You have no idea the ramifications of her twisted plans.”

“The tree,” Rutger said through a yawn.

“Pardon me?” Master George replied.

“The tree, the tree! Use your analogy to explain what she wants to do.”

“Ah, yes.” Master George turned his attention back to the kids. “Imagine the tree for me again, if you will. One of the big branches we talked about—one of the main Realities that shoots off from the trunk of Reality Prime—is now under the control of Mistress Jane. Using the dark Chi’karda of the Thirteenth Reality, Mistress Jane plans to sever the other branches from the trunk, if you will, destroying them entirely. Then she can conquer Reality Prime and rule the known universe. If that happens, she’d be able to create her own twisted Realities at will, essentially recreating the tree for her own purposes.”

If the other kids in the group were anything like Tick, all Master George saw at that moment were wide-eyed stares. Tick had a feeling they underestimated the horrible intentions of Mistress Jane.

“Oh, poppycock, we’re getting too deep into all of this,” Master George complained as he paced back and forth in front of the fire. “All you need to know is there are different versions of the world we live in called Realities and all of them are important in their own way. Mistress Jane plans to use her newly discovered powers to destroy life as we know it. And we, the Realitants—and I mean *we*—must stop her.”

“How?” Tick and Paul asked in unison.

Master George smiled. “Ah, yes, *how* indeed. It’s time for the fun part, my good people. I have something to show you.” He walked through a small door in the far corner of the room, reappearing a few seconds later. In his hand he held a long golden rod, at least three feet in length and several inches in diameter; it shone and sparkled in the firelight, polished to perfection. Up and down one entire side were a series of dials and knobs and switches, a small label below each one. Once he returned to his lecture spot, Master George held the rod high for everyone to see.

“This, my friends,” he said proudly, “is a Barrier Wand.”

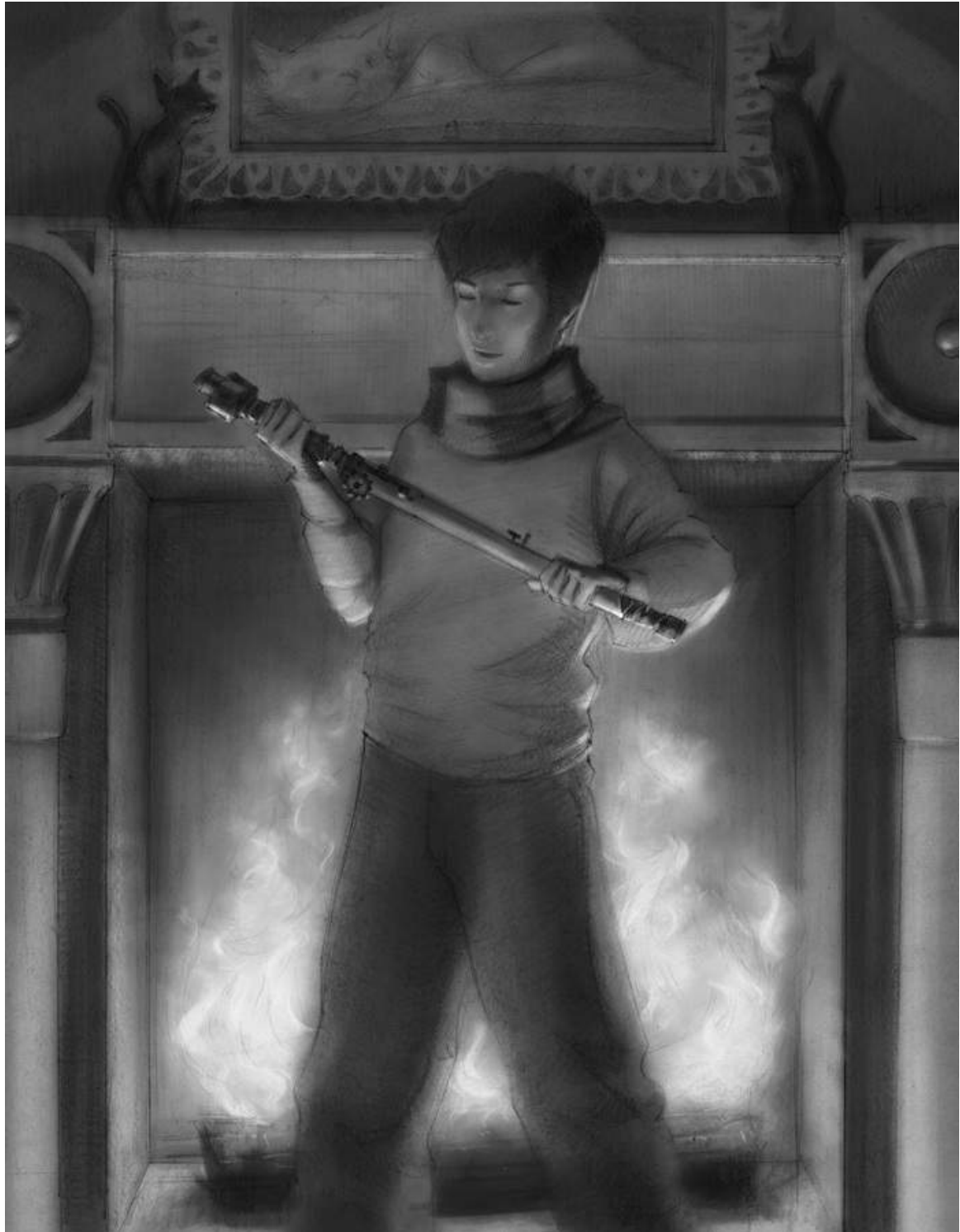
Oohs and ahs sounded across the room.

“This instrument—and the Chi’karda Drive within its inner chamber—is the single most important invention in the history of mankind. I say this

without the slightest pause, *knowing* it's true. It is the *only* way a person can travel from one Reality to another. It harnesses and controls the power of the Chi'karda—manipulates it, bends it, wields it, shapes it.”

Master George ran his hand down the length of the device. “*This* is how we control travel between the barriers of the Realities—what we call winking, because it literally happens in the blink of an eye. Without this Barrier Wand, and the few others like it, there would be no study of the Realities, no travel between them, no . . . Mistress Jane problem, actually. If we can remove her Barrier Wand from the Thirteenth Reality, she and her twisted powers will be trapped there for a very long time. Enough time for us to devise a more permanent solution to the problem.”

“How does the Barrier Wand work?” Paul asked.



“Oh, yes, thank you for asking.” Master George held the golden rod up so everyone could clearly see as he pointed out the controls running down the near side. “You simply adjust the doohickey here, then the thingamajig here, then the whatchamacallit here, and so forth and so on. It’s simple really. Trust me—it *does* work. With this Wand, you can control the Chi’karda to such a degree that it will transport you between Realities.”

“Ooh, can I see it?” Sofia asked, her hands twitching with curiosity to hold

the Wand.

“Of course. Come on up, all of you. Have a look!”

Tick shot out of his chair, grimacing at the coldness of his still-damp pants, and got to Master George first. He laughed out loud when he was close enough to read the labels on the instrument. “I thought you were joking.”

“Joking about what?” Master George asked.

“The most important scientific discovery of all time, and the first dial is called the Doohickey?” Tick pointed to a neatly printed label on the Wand.

Sofia chuckled as she pointed at a small switch. “And there’s the Thingamajig.”

“That’s for a very important reason, thank you very much,” Master George said, momentarily pulling the Barrier Wand away from the kids. “It’s so spying eyes can’t figure out how it works. We’ve labeled them that way on purpose.”

“Ingenious,” Paul snickered.

Tick looked over at Sato, still sitting on the couch, arms folded in defiance. “Don’t you want to see it?”

Sato stared at the floor. “Leave me alone.”

Tick shrugged, then surprised himself when he let out a huge yawn. He glanced at his watch, surprised to see it was almost three o’clock in the morning.

Master George seemed to sense Tick’s thoughts. “It’s grown very late indeed, my good associates. It’s almost morning here. I think we should all be off to bed. We can finish our discussion tomorrow. There is still much to learn—and much to prepare for.”

“Wait a minute—” Paul began.

“No, no, no,” Master George said, waving his Wand like a great magician. “We must have fresh minds to continue. To bed it is—no arguments. No need to worry about the dirty plates; I’ll be happy to clean up.”

A hand grabbed Tick’s shoulder and he turned to see Mothball.

“Come on,” she said. “Off we go. I’ll be showin’ ya to yer sleepin’ quarters. Methinks we could all use a good night’s rest, I do. Come on.”

She moved toward the side door. Tick, Sofia, and Paul fell in line behind her, grumbling like two year olds who didn’t want to go to bed.

Sato didn’t move a muscle.

“Looks like Mr. Happy will be sleeping on the couch,” Paul whispered to Tick as they stepped through the door.

~

Sato fumed on the inside as he sat alone in the big room, the fire spitting,

slowly fading to ashes. Master George hadn't so much as given him a glance, completely ignoring Sato's obvious distrust and unhappiness. They *all* ignored him for the most part, thinking they were so smart and so funny. *Better than Sato.*

Little did they know he'd listened intently to every single word that came out of the old man's mouth, storing them away inside his computer of a mind, learning every morsel. He had to know every piece of the puzzle if he hoped to accomplish what he'd planned to do from the very first day he'd received the letter from M.G.

He had to make things right. To quench the thirst for revenge that consumed him. To avenge the death of his family.

I need to stay sharp, he thought. *Befriend no one.* He couldn't trust anyone, precisely for the very reason his family died.

No, Sato would never make the same fatal mistake his parents had. And he'd never trust another person ever again.

Especially Master George.

A Bump in the Night

These are our digs?” Paul asked.

“I miss my mansion,” Sofia moaned.

Tick agreed. Their “sleeping quarters” didn’t look very inviting. They stood in a small rectangular room in which six cots had been set up, three along each of the longer walls. Folded gray and black blankets and pillows lay stacked on top of each cot. The only other furniture in the room was a desk and a three-drawer wooden dresser. The floor of the room was a flat metallic gray.

“Would you rather sleep out in the raft?” Rutger asked. “We can arrange it.”

“Mister Tick,” Mothball said, nudging him. “There’s some dry clothes in the chest of drawers there. Better be changin’ out of yer soppies, ya should.”

“Oh, thanks.”

Tick walked over to the dresser as everyone else chose a cot and started spreading out their blankets. After a full minute of rummaging through the drawers, the only thing Tick found that was close to wearable was an enormous one-piece nightshirt. “This thing looks like a dress,” he said to Mothball.

“If ya’d rather soak in yer wet undies all night, fine by me,” she replied.

“Where’s the bathroom?”

She nodded toward a short metal door. Sighing, Tick went and changed into his ridiculous pajamas.

~

Frazier Gunn had listened to the muffled murmurs of people talking all night. His captor had *guests*, apparently. Almost insane from the months of isolation, Frazier felt like chewing through the metal and killing every last one of them.

I’d need stronger teeth, he thought.

He knew he was going crazy, and he didn’t care. He curled up on the floor like a dog and tried to go back to sleep.

Frazier longed to hear more clearly through the cold metal walls of his terrible prison. The only word he felt confident he’d understood in all these months was *Annika*. George had mentioned the name several times, and for

some reason it resonated through the metal without being distorted beyond recognition.

Annika. An unusual name for sure. Frazier had only known one person in his life named Annika. She was one of Mistress Jane's closest servants and one of several people, including Frazier, who intensely competed for Jane's favor.

Was it a coincidence? Did George somehow know Annika? There'd always been rumors of spies in Jane's camp. Had Frazier discovered a gold nugget of information?

If only he could escape. If only he could warn Mistress Jane . . .

~

"Hey, looky!" Paul laughed when Tick walked out in his long nightshirt, which hung all the way to the floor. "If it's not Ebenezer Scrooge himself! Where's your stocking cap, Grandpa?"

"Very funny," Tick said as he walked to an empty cot and started setting up his bed.

"I think you look right handsome, I do," Mothball said.

"Uh-oh, looks like someone's got a crush," Paul said.

Sofia huffed as she settled under her blanket. "Paul, you're almost as annoying in person as you were on the e-mail. Keep smarting off and you'll get a Pacini fist in the nose."

"Oh, come on, you know you love me." He leaned back against the wall with his hands clasped behind his head. "Man, this is the life—no chores, no one yelling at me to brush my teeth. I love living in the middle of the ocean."

"Ha!" Rutger barked from the doorway. "You'll be wishing for chores once we send you on your initiation mission."

Tick froze, his pillow still in his hands. "Initiation mission?"

Rutger nodded with a wicked smile. "You didn't think Master George was kidding about retrieving Mistress Jane's Barrier Wand, did you?"

"You can't possibly mean *we* have to do it," Sofia said.

"You'll find out tomorrow. Get some sleep."

"Oh, that'll be nice and easy after telling us something like that," Tick said, straightening his blankets and getting into bed.

"Dude," Paul yawned, "where in the world *are* we anyway?"

"That's an easy one," Mothball said. "Middle of the ocean, we are."

"But *where*? Which ocean?"

Mothball and Rutger exchanged a wary look. "Go on, you tell 'em," Mothball finally said.

"This is the headquarters of the Realitants, you see," Rutger began, "and

there's a reason we're here. Master George has to do a lot of *winking*, a lot of working with the Chi'karda. And this is the one place in the world where it's the most concentrated, the easiest to penetrate and control. It's by far the strongest link between all of the Realities."

"But where *are* we?" Sofia insisted.

Rutger rocked back and forth on his feet. "You're going to laugh when I tell you."

"Blimey, just tell 'em, fat man," Mothball said, rolling her eyes.

"Yeah, tell us," Paul added.

Rutger folded his hands and rested them on his belly. "We're smack dab in the middle of the Bermuda Triangle."

~

Master George let out a long, blissful sigh as he stuck his sore feet into a tub full of salt and warm water. Muffintops jumped onto his lap, purring as she licked his hands.

"Hello there, little friend," he said, petting her soft fur. "Quite the day, we've had—busy, busy, busy. Never knew it would be so difficult explaining all the many things we know. Those poor little chaps. They've no idea what lies ahead of them. None at all."

Master George leaned back and closed his eyes, wiggling his toes in the hot water. "Dear Muffintops, can we really do it? Can we really send them to that dreadful place? There's a mighty good chance everything will fall to pieces, you know. They could be attacked or captured. I don't know if the Sound Slicers will be enough . . ."

The cat looked up at Master George, as if it wanted to answer but couldn't.

"Ah, yes, I know, I know. We've no choice really. Must let them *prove* themselves, mustn't we?" He paused, thinking about the three eager children and how different they were from the boy Sato. Of course, Master George had expected nothing different from the troubled son of his former friend.

Master George smiled. When he really thought about the potential of the four kids he had gathered together, he didn't know who he felt sorrier for in the coming days, weeks, and years.

His new batch of Realitants or Mistress Jane.

~

"The Bermuda Triangle?" Paul asked, sounding like he'd just been told they were living inside an alien's big toe on Mars. "I feel like I'm in a bad made-for-TV movie."

Rutger answered. "For some reason this area by far has the biggest

concentration of Chi'karda in the world. Something tremendous must've happened here a long, long time ago, but we haven't been able to figure it out. There's certainly nothing recorded in the history books."

"Why's it such a big deal that there's more Chi'karda here than anywhere else?" Tick asked, stumbling only a little over the unfamiliar word.

"Why's it a big deal?" Rutger repeated, throwing up his arms like Tick had just asked him why he needed oxygen to breathe. "Do you have an unreasonable level of earwax, boy? Didn't you listen to a word Master George said tonight?"

"Hey, be nice," Sofia warned. "Unless you want a punch in the nose, too."

Rutger ignored her. "Everything having to do with the Realities revolves around the Chi'karda. Because it's so powerful here, it's the easiest place to *wink* to and from the other Realities. It's also the best place for Master George to monitor Chi'karda levels around the world. That's how he's watched all of you from day one so closely."

"How?" Paul asked.

"By using another invention from Chu Industries in the Fourth Reality. It's called a nanolocator."

"Sounds fancy," Sofia said. "Maybe Pacinis should make them."

"I assure, you, Miss Pacini, there's a big difference between making nanolocators and *spaghetti* sauce." Sofia leaned forward like she was ready to get out of bed and attack Rutger, but he held up his hands in reconciliation, then hurried to continue. "A nanolocator is basically a microscopic robot, but it's so tiny you can't see it with the naked eye. It crawls into your skin and sends various signals back here to the Command Center."

"What kind of signals?" Tick asked, shifting on his cot to get more comfortable. He wasn't sure he liked the idea of a tiny robot crawling under his skin.

"Signals that monitor your Chi'karda levels, your global position, your body temperature—all kinds of things. Our fearless leader had to have some way to keep tabs on you, don't you think? The nanolocators also told us where to send the Gnat Rats and Tingle Wraiths, which were programmed to find you and no one else."

"Ah, man, I feel so . . . violated," Paul said in a deadpan voice, then barked a laugh.

"How did he get it inside our bodies?" Tick asked.

"That's easy," Mothball said. "The little fella was on the first letter he sent you."

"Serious?" Paul asked.

"When each one of you opened the envelope and pulled out the letter, the

nanolocator quickly sought a heat source—your hand—and slipped right between your skin cells.” Rutger grinned. “Brilliant, don’t you think?”

“Dude, that just seems *wrong*,” Paul said, shaking his head.

“Oh, boo hoo,” Rutger replied, rubbing his eyes in a mock cry. “How else were we supposed to know when or if you burned the first letter. Or when you made your Pick?”

“Pick?” all three kids asked at once.

“I’ll take that one,” Mothball said. “A Pick’s what Master George calls a ruddy big decision. Your Chi’karda level spikes like a rocket shootin’ off to space, it does. Showed up on his big monitor and let him know when yer were truly committed to the job he offered, when you really promised yourself there was no turning back. Smart old chap, don’t you think?”

“Master George watched his big screen every day,” Rutger said, “so he’d know when you made your Pick. Word is he just about suffocated his cat hugging the poor thing when you three made your Pick at almost the same time. That was uncanny.”

Tick thought of that night he knelt in front of the fireplace and the decision he’d made to not burn the letter in his hand. He remembered the sensation of warmth that had spread throughout his whole body. *That was my Pick*, he realized. He’d felt that same sensation again later, when he screamed out in the dark woods and managed to somehow change reality. *Is that what using the Chi’karda feels like?* Tick shivered. It was a lot to think about.

“What are we in, anyway?” Paul asked, looking above and around him. “Is this a boat or what?”

“No, it’s a building, firmly rooted in the ocean floor far below us,” Rutger said. “Master George used a little trick he learned from the Eighth Reality, where it’s mostly ocean. They developed some amazing cabling technology that allows them to build entire cities on the ocean. We’re perfectly safe and stable. You can barely feel the waves unless we have a real doozy of a storm.”

Mothball yawned, a booming roar that made Tick jump. “Master George will have our hides, he will, if he finds out we kept you up so late. Come on, now, we need—”

“Wait,” Tick interrupted her. “Just one more question, okay?”

“Be quick about it. Me bones hurt I’m so tired.”

“What’s the deal with cemeteries? Rutger said something once about the difference between life and death . . . I can’t remember.”

“It was another famous Master George quote,” Rutger replied. “‘*Nothing in this world better reflects the difference between life and death than the power of choice.*’ Chi’karda levels are very high in cemeteries. Master George says it has to do with the lingering effects of the life-changing choices those people made. One way or another, their choices led them to their fates,

whether good or bad.”

“And so we needed to go there because . . .” Tick started but stopped, worried his answer would be wrong.

“So we could *wink* easier,” Sofia said. “The stronger the levels of Chi’karda, the easier it is to travel between Realities.”

“Exactly,” Rutger agreed. “Not only can you travel between the barriers, you can travel between different locations of heavy Chi’karda spots within the *same* Reality. That’s how Master George could wink you from your towns to this place. He simply honed in on your nanolocator signals and winked you away!”

“My head hurts,” Paul groaned, falling onto his back as he rubbed his forehead.

“That’s because you Americans aren’t smart enough to get it,” Sofia said. “I’ll be happy to tutor you on everything tomorrow.”

“Methinks I’ve had enough for one day,” Mothball said. “Good night, all.”

She and Rutger left the room, flicking off the light as they went.

A few more words were said after they’d left, but sheer exhaustion soon pulled the three of them into a deep sleep.

~

Something jolted Frazier out of his dreamless slumber.

He swatted at the dark air around him, scrambling into a sitting position. What had it been? Was he—

He heard a loud thump against the wall by his cot. Then another, a clang of metal against metal that echoed throughout the small cell. Then another, this time *louder*.

What was that?

He scurried over to the light switch and flipped it on, squinting in the brightness. To his shock, a small dent, about three inches wide, bent the wall inward just above his bed. The bolts connecting the wall to the surrounding metal had loosened slightly, rattling as another big thump sounded. The wall bent even farther.

One final boom sounded through the room, and the entire piece of metal fell onto his bed, its bolts cracking like whips as they broke in half. Frazier stared past the hole in the wall, seeing the endless ocean in front of him, the first traces of dawn casting a purple glow over the deep waters. Then, inexplicably, a face appeared from below—someone he’d never seen before. It was a man with scraggly black hair and an unshaven face.

“Come on, Mister Gunn, we don’t have much time!”

“What . . . who . . . what . . .” Frazier couldn’t find any words after such a

long time in confinement.

“Mistress Jane sent us to rescue you,” the man yelled.

“Rescue me?” Frazier could hardly believe it.

“Yes!” the man replied. “And then we’re going to destroy this place once and for all.”

Escalation of Plans

Tick woke to the awful smell of fish breath and an annoying scratchy feeling on his right cheek. From somewhere in the distance, he thought he heard a loud boom like an underground explosion. He opened his eyes to see two yellow orbs staring at him. It was a cat, pawing at his face to . . . wake him?

Tick sat up, accidentally knocking the cat to the floor. “Oh, sorry.” The sleek feline hissed in annoyance, then padded over to Paul’s cot to wake him as well.

That’s one smart cat, Tick thought.

Sofia was already awake, rubbing her eyes and stretching. Tick looked at his watch to see only a few hours had passed since they went to bed. The thought made him twice as tired; all he wanted to do was go back to sleep.

But then the whole world seemed to go crazy at once.

Another boom, this time much louder, shook the building as it echoed off the walls. The door to the room flew open and banged against the wall, rebounding back and knocking Master George to the floor, who was wearing a bright red nightshirt even more ridiculous than the one Tick wore. He grunted and scrambled back to his feet.

“Good job, Muffintops, jolly good job!” Master George picked up his cat and petted its back. “You three, we must hurry! Our plans have been . . . escalated.”

The others had slept in their clothes, but Tick still wore his horrible pajamas. As Paul and Sofia moved to follow Master George, Tick quickly went into the bathroom where he’d hung his clothes to finish drying. They were still damp, but he changed into them as fast as he could. He’d just pulled on his second shoe when someone pounded on the door.

“Mister Higginbottom!” came the muffled voice of Master George. “What part of ‘we must hurry’ did you not understand?”

“Sorry!” Tick called as he wrapped his scarf around his neck. He opened the door and followed the old man, who was already across the room. Another boom sounded, and Tick felt like he was in a bunker, taking heavy artillery from the enemy. He tried to fight the panic that surged up his chest and into his throat.

They gathered back in the main room with the fireplace. Sato sat in the

exact same spot where they'd left him only a few hours before, though his puffy eyes showed he'd just woken up as well. Rutger and Mothball were there too; the tall woman had an enormous backpack perched on her shoulders.

Master George stood in front of the now-cold fireplace, holding the shiny Barrier Wand in both hands, his cat curled on the ground at his feet. "My friends, we are officially under siege."

"What're you talking about?" Sofia asked as another boom sounded in the building. "Is someone *bombing* us?"

"I'd hardly call them bombs, my good lady, but we haven't any more time to talk about it. Jane's power over the mutated Chi'karda must be growing if she has enough daring to attack us here. I must send you off on your mission immediately." He started adjusting the seven dials and switches of the Barrier Wand, his tongue pressed between his lips.

"Whoa, dude," Paul said. "I don't like the sound of this."

"We don't have time to argue," Rutger said from where he leaned against the door. "Master George and I will stay here and protect the Command Center as best we can; we have a few tricks up our sleeve that Mistress Jane doesn't know about. You three are going with Mothball to the Thirteenth Reality."

"The Thirteenth—" Tick started, his stomach falling into a pit of cold ice.

"Don't waste another moment of my time with complaints or questions!" Master George finished his flipping and turning of the Wand's controls and looked at the four recruits. "This attack on my home shows you the urgency of your mission. Follow Mothball's orders. She has weapons called Sound Slicers if you run into trouble. Please do me a favor and don't point them *at* each other. I'd rather you *not* return to me with your brains turned into runny oatmeal."

Sound Slicers? Tick wondered. He really wanted to voice a question, but the man in charge barely paused to breathe.

Master George held up a warning finger. "It is *imperative* you succeed in bringing back the Barrier Wand of Mistress Jane. We must seal her in the Thirteenth Reality forever. Or at least until we can properly prepare to fight against her evil magic hordes. If everything goes as planned, it should be quite, er, easy."

Tick didn't like the hesitancy in Master George's voice. He already felt like a rookie paratrooper about to be pushed out of the plane for the first time over a major battlefield, under heavy fire.

"Atticus, you enjoy chess, yes?" Master George said in a tight voice.

Tick couldn't think of a question that seemed more out of place. "Yeah."

"Good. Come here."

Tick moved closer to Master George, who put the Barrier Wand directly in front of his face. “It’s been my experience that chess lovers are quite good at memorization. Am I correct?”

“Uh . . .”

“Excellent! Now look at each of the controls on the Barrier Wand and memorize their position. Exactly, now—there’s no room for error, none at all.”

“But—”

“Quickly!”

Tick swallowed the lump in his throat and did as he was told, scanning his eyes up and down the length of the golden Wand.

“Hurry, we only have a minute at most!” Master George said.

Pushing his panic away, Tick tried to freeze-frame the image of each dial, switch, and knob in his mind, storing it, *burning* it in his memory. He was still focusing on the bottom dial when Master George took it away and began switching everything again.

Master George spoke as he worked. “Mothball isn’t . . . agreeable with Barrier Wands, so it’ll be up to you, Atticus, to bring all of you back in case something happens to me.”

Tick felt like someone had just poured acid down his throat.

“Mark your watches,” Master George continued. “If I don’t wink you back here in thirty hours—*precisely* thirty hours—that means that Rutger and I are in serious trouble. If that happens, Atticus, you will have to use Mistress Jane’s Barrier Wand—which looks exactly like this one—in order to escape the Thirteenth Reality. Adjust it as I showed you, then hit this button on the top.” He pointed at a perfect circle cut into the top of the cylinder. “It will wink you to one of our satellite locations where you will be safe from harm. Understand?”

Tick nodded, scratching his neck through his scarf, nervous and afraid like never before. Another explosion rocked the building, throwing everyone off balance; a brick fell from the mantle of the fireplace, a poof of dust billowing out. Master George almost dropped the Barrier Wand but caught it just in time.

Paul cleared his throat. “And how’re we supposed to steal a Barrier Wand from the most evil woman in history, as you put it?”

“We have a spy named Annika in place. All you have to do is meet her and she will help you retrieve it.”

“Is that all?” Sofia said.

“Listen to me,” Master George said, all semblance of his normal, cheery, quirky self gone. “You have all shown tremendous resolve and courage in

making it to me, and I am proud as buttons to know you. But you must do this one last thing before officially becoming Realitants. Show me you can do this, and a life of adventure and intrigue awaits you, I promise. Do we have an understanding?”

The building rumbled again as Tick made eye contact with Sofia, then Paul. They looked as scared as he felt, which for some sick reason made him feel better.

“Let’s do it,” Paul said.

“Yeah,” Sofia agreed. “Psycho Jane’ll be sorry once I get my hands on her.”

They both looked at Tick, waiting for his answer. “You know I’m in,” he said.

“Splendid,” Master George said. “Sato?”

Everyone looked over at the disgruntled boy on the couch. He stood up, trying to bring the scowl back to his face but failing; he was just as scared as everyone else. “I’m only going because I don’t trust Master George and I want to make sure you three don’t mess up.” He walked over and joined the small group standing around the Barrier Wand.

“Sato,” Master George said, in an unusually kind voice for someone who had just been insulted. “I know more about you than you understand, and I feel no anger. When you succeed in this mission, I hope to gain your trust, and may I daresay, to become your friend.”

Sato said nothing in reply, looking at the floor.

A horrible sound of crunching metal came from the hallway where Tick had first entered the building, followed by another rocking explosion.

“Best be gettin’ a move on, don’t ya think?” Mothball said.

“Quite right you are, my dear friend!” Master George said, holding the Barrier Wand out in front of him, his arm rigid, so the golden rod stood upright in the middle of the group. “All of you, hands on the Wand! It’ll be much easier if you’re touching it!”

Mothball was first, wrapping her huge hand around the very top of the cylinder. One by one, the others followed her example, clasping the Wand in quick succession—Paul, Sofia, Tick. All eyes went to Sato, who turned and spat on the ground. Then, with all the enthusiasm of putting his hand into a cage full of rattlesnakes, he grabbed the lower edge of the Wand.

“I’m very sorry indeed we didn’t have more time to talk,” Master George said, his tone solemn. “I expected a few more hours at least, but we must move on, mustn’t we? Remember the plan, and remember your courage. May the Realities smile upon you, and may we see each other again very soon.”

Without waiting for a response, Master George pushed the golden button.

The Thirteenth Reality

Mistress Jane sat on her throne, eyes closed, deep in thought as she waited for her next visitor. *What a life mine has become.* So many people hated and despised her, wished she were dead. But they simply did not understand. All of her cruelty and harsh rule had a purpose, and someday the Realities would know of her goodness.

All she wanted was to make life better.

What a poor existence the wretches of Reality Prime eked out from day to day. It was a marvel they continued on despite the drab bleakness of their lives—no power, no joy, no *color*. Jane would change all of that. The new and improved version of Chi’karda made every second a wonderful moment, and it must be shared. It must be *spread*. The Realitants had always talked about finding a utopian Reality someday, a paradise on Earth; Jane could make it happen.

She was so close to implementing her plan. One by one, she would fragment and destroy the branching Realities until only Prime and the Thirteenth remained. Then, with an army such as never before witnessed in all of history, she would take over Reality Prime, consuming it with the mutated Chi’karda. Only then could the universe be rebuilt, one world at a time, a better place for all.

In a million years, her name would still be remembered with love and worship.

She needed help, of course. She’d sent a letter to a very important person, setting up a meeting on May thirteenth—a meeting that represented the final and most important part of her plan. *Only one more week*, she thought. If Reginald Chu agreed to her terms at that meeting, nothing could stop her. Nothing. Especially not the pathetic and laughable Master George and his dwindling Realitants. Just hours earlier, she’d finally initiated the attack on his headquarters, an act for which she’d shown much patience, having wanted to do it for years.

One more week until the meeting with Chu. The final piece of the puzzle.
Jane opened her eyes. It was time to speak with Gunn.

Frazier felt sweat seeping into his eyebrows from his forehead, as if the

skin itself were melting.

He stood before the huge wooden door with its iron bindings and handle, barely able to breathe as he waited for the horrible thing to open. He had failed, miserably, and there was no telling how Mistress Jane might react. Sometimes she was very merciful to her failures—allowing them to die with a quick snap of her odd abilities in this place. At other times, she displayed much less kindness. Jane had immense amounts of control over the mutated Chi'karda that existed in the Thirteenth, and she loved to . . . experiment.

A muted thump sounded from the other side of the door, followed by the odd sound of something *dissolving*, like the scratchy rush of poured sand or the amplified roar of a million termites devouring a house. A hole appeared in the middle of the door, expanding outward like a ripple in a pond, devouring the wood and iron of the door as it grew until the entrance to Jane's throne room was completely open.

Why can't she just open the door, Frazier thought to himself. *Always has to show off her twisted power.*

Frazier steeled himself, promising himself he would remain dignified as he met his fate. He knew he had only one chance to redeem his folly and perhaps to save his life. Smoothing his filthy shirt, he stepped forward into the gaudy and ridiculous throne room of Mistress Jane.

From top to bottom, side to side, the room was a complete sea of yellow.

Tapestries of yellow people on yellow horses in fields of yellow daisies. Yellow padded chairs on yellow rugs on top of yellow carpets. The walls, the couches, the paintings, the pillows, the servants' clothing, the lamps, the books—even the wood and bricks of the fireplace had been painted yellow. It made Frazier sick to his stomach, and reminded him once again that the woman he'd chosen to follow was completely insane.

But Frazier knew one day Jane would snap, and someone would need to replace her. *That's where I come in,* he thought. *If I can only survive this day.*

A buzzing sound from above made him look up to see two large insects flying down toward him.

Snooper bugs, he thought. *Could she be any more paranoid?*

The enormous winged creatures flew around him in a tight circle, their cellophane wings flapping in a blur, their elongated beaks snipping at his clothes and poking at his skin. Frazier winced, but kept still and silent, knowing the vicious things could get quite nasty if you didn't submit completely. Finally, after inflicting dozens of tiny wounds all over his body, the two Snoopers flew back to their nests. They didn't need to communicate anything further to Jane—if Frazier had been holding any poisons or weapons, he'd be dead.

"Come forward," a gruff voice said from the side. Frazier looked over to

see a grotesquely fat man who looked like a hideous cross between a dwarf and a troll, hovering ten feet in the air, his plump legs dangling. His head, face, and chest were covered in dark, greasy hair, and he wore nothing but a wide skirt around his middle, proudly displaying his disgustingly bloated skin. “The Mistress will see you now.” He held out a flabby arm, gesturing deep into the throne room. “Hurry. She is a busy woman.”

Frazier shuddered and followed the guard’s instructions, staring straight ahead. He didn’t stop walking until he reached the Kneeling Pillow of Mistress Jane, where he did as countless others had done before him, dropping to his knees and kissing the ground before him. Then, daring to show some boldness, he leaned back on his legs and looked up at the preposterous throne.

It was black.

Mistress Jane had never explained to anyone why her throne was made from completely nondescript, heavy, black iron, nor had anyone ever dared ask. But Frazier thought it must be a symbol that her seat of power was so important, she wanted it to stand out among the world of yellow.

She sat on her black throne, dressed from head to toe in the color she so dearly loved. She wore a hat embroidered with lace and daffodils that stretched a foot above her bald head. Her sparkling gown fit her body tightly, covering every inch from the middle of her neck to her shiny yellow heels. Horn-rimmed glasses sat atop her nose, her emerald eyes peering through like focused lasers.

Everything about this woman is just . . . weird, Frazier thought as he waited for her to say something.

“I don’t know *why* we rescued you,” Mistress Jane said, her voice taut with barely veiled anger. “We could just as easily have destroyed the complex of that *buffoon* Master George while you still sat inside, bawling your eyes out.”

“Yes, Mistress Jane,” Frazier replied. He knew better than to say anything else—yet.

“We finally had a hope of knowing George’s plan once and for all—and you threw it down the drain in exchange for a little fun with your Chu Industries toy and a car. You better hope the attack on George takes care of any loose ends. SPEAK!” She belted this last word, causing several nearby servants to gasp.

Frazier stumbled on his words. “Mistress Jane . . . I n-never intended to k-kill them. I only meant to scare them enough to t-talk. I failed, and I’m sorry.”

Jane stood up, her reddening face all the fiercer against the yellow background of her hat and dress. “They did not *die*, you blubbering sack of drool!”

Frazier couldn’t hide his shock at hearing this. *How in the world did they*

escape before the car . . .

He knew that now was not the time to wonder, now was the time for apologies and groveling. “I am very sorry, Mistress Jane.”

“Listen to me well, Frazier Gunn,” Jane said as she sat back down on her throne. “And let my servants put this on record. I give you one spoken sentence—one sentence only—to convince me why I should not send you to your death at the hands of the scallywag beasts. And not the nice ones that only take a week to digest their food.”

Frazier closed his eyes, throwing all of his mental powers into quashing the rising panic and constructing a single sentence that could save his life. He had nothing. Nothing! But then a single word popped into his head, giving him an idea. It was desperate, but his only shot. Quickly, in his mind, he visualized each word of a sentence one by one, going over them several times. Finally, he opened his eyes and spoke.

“Master George has a spy in your presence, and I know who it is.”

Jane’s eyes screwed up into tight wrinkles, her brow creased. She folded her arms, studying Frazier for a long moment. “Nitwit!” she suddenly screamed, causing even more servants to gasp.

Frazier jumped, his heart sinking to the floor. “But—”

Before he could utter another word, a young girl dressed entirely in yellow zoomed through the air from the back of the room, stopping to hover directly in front of Frazier, facing Jane. No one had figured out how Jane used the mutated Chi’karda to enable flight, but seeing people flying always gave Frazier the creeps. It seemed so . . . unnatural.

“Yes, Mistress?” a high-pitched voice asked.

“Fetch me a banana sandwich.” Jane leaned to the side, peering down at Frazier. “We have much to discuss, and I’m hungry. And make it quick!” She clapped her hands, a booming echo that shook the walls.

As the little servant flew off to obey Jane’s orders, Frazier tried to regain his breath after that frantic moment when he’d thought for sure he’d be killed, all the while in disbelief that Jane could stoop so low as to rename a child *Nitwit*. Of course, the last one had been named *Nincompoop*, but had been disposed of once Jane got tired of yelling “*Nincompoop!*” every time she wanted something.

“Frazier!” Jane snapped.

“Y-y-yes, Mistress?” he stammered.

“Start talking.”

Frazier told her about Annika.

It truly did happen in the blink of an eye, a quick tingle shooting down Tick's spine.

The instant Master George pushed the button on top of the Barrier Wand, the room of the Realitant headquarters vanished, replaced by thousands of massive trees covered in moss. Tick and the other recruits, along with Mothball, stood in a dark forest, hazy sunlight barely breaking through the thick canopy of branches to make small patches of gold on the earthy floor. The haunted sounds of exotic birds and insects filled the creepy woods, smells of roots and rotting leaves wafting through the air. Tick had the uneasy feeling that the forest wanted to eat him alive.

"Where are we?" Paul asked, though he must've known the answer.

"In the Thirteenth, we are. Deep in the Forest of Plague," Mothball whispered.

"Forest of *Plague*?" Sofia asked with a snort. "Lovely."

"A great battle was fought 'ere," Mothball said, slowly turning as she scanned the ancient trees, most of which were thick enough to make an entire house. Gnarled, twisted branches reached out as if trying to escape their masters. "Many moons ago, it was. Thousands died, their rottin' bodies creating a plague that was downright nasty. So I've 'eard, anyway. Must be true, seeing as there's quite a bit of Chi'karda here. Come on, follow me."

"Wait," Sato said, trying to sound stern but coming across as a grumpy jerk. "Tell us the plan before we take a step."

Tick rolled his eyes, but quickly so Sato couldn't see him do it. *Things are scary enough*, he thought. *Why does this guy have to make it worse?*

"The plan's quite simple, really," Mothball said, not acting bothered at all. "Right over yonder"—she pointed toward an ivy-covered copse of pine trees—"there's some right dandy Windbikes that we can take to meet Master George's spy, Annika. She's been settin' things up for months to get close to the Barrier Wand. We meet Annika, we get the Wand, we come back 'ere in thirty hours, and home we go."

"Sounds too easy," Sato said with a comical sneer.

"Sure it is, old chap, sure it is." Mothball turned and walked toward the pine trees. "Got a better idea, let me know. But best be right quick about it."

As Tick and the others followed their eight-foot-tall guide, Sato said from behind, "How do we know we can trust this spy? Maybe she works for Mistress Jane."

"Find out soon enough, we will," Mothball replied, not slowing at all.

"Quit your whining and come on," Sofia snapped.

Tick cringed, wishing his friend would ease up on the poor kid. Tick didn't like him either, but Sofia seemed way too harsh—who knew what Sato might do to retaliate.

Begrudgingly, Sato finally started walking. The sounds of footfalls crunching the thick undergrowth of the forest suddenly filled the air, echoing off the canopy of interwoven tree limbs.

Tick moved to catch up with Mothball, practically running to keep up with her pace. “I have a question.”

“Go on and ask it, then.” Mothball pushed an enormous branch out of the way that everyone else simply walked *under*.

“The alternate versions of ourselves in other worlds—does that mean there is one of me in every Reality?”

“That’s usually the case, it is. We call ’em Alterants. Strange how all that works—even though the Realities can grow in vastly different ways from each other, there seems to be a definite pattern when it comes to the *people*.”

“What do you mean?” Tick asked, stooping to avoid a huge chunk of moss that drooped over a thick limb like a giant beard.

“Even though a Reality may have different governments and cultures and climates and all that from another Reality, the general pedigree of people remains quite similar—downright spooky, it is.” A huge bird cawed from overhead, followed by the squeal of a small animal.

“So in your Reality—the . . .”

“The Fifth, it is.”

“Yeah, the Fifth. There’s a really tall version of me there? My Alterant? And he’s alive right now, with parents named Edgar and Lorena?”

“Chances are ya be right. Course, I’ve never met ’em, and never tried. Dangerous stuff, messin’ with Alterants.”

Sofia and Paul had been following closely and listening to every word while Sato hung back, only a couple of steps behind them. Though he acted indifferent to the conversation, Tick had a feeling Sato was intently paying attention.

“Why is it dangerous to mess with Alterants?” Sofia asked.

“Since I had dealings with Tick in Reality Prime,” Mothball said, pausing a second to reassess her bearings. She changed directions slightly and headed down a shallow ravine scattered with boulders among the trees. “I didn’t want to meet his Alterant in any of the other Realities. Not only could it make me go mad, it could lead to the little sir meetin’ his taller self in my Reality. Disaster, that.”

“Why?” Paul asked.

“If two Alterants meet and truly recognize each other for what and who they are, well, then only one of the poor blokes can survive. Still trying to figure out the why and how, we are, but one of them ceases to exist. Sometimes that causes a nasty chain reaction that can rattle the Realities to

their bones. Bet yer best buttons some of the worst earthquakes and such you've had were because of Alterants seein' each other. Master George and the Realitants have worked their buns off to avoid such meetings, but Mistress Jane likes to bring Alterants together. She thinks it's funny. Mad, she is. Crazy as a brain-dead Bugaboo soldier."

That was the second time Tick had heard Mothball refer to Bugaboo soldiers, but he was too busy thinking about Alterants to ask any more questions.

"Whoa, man," Paul said. "This is some downright freaky stuff. You're telling me there's all these Pauls running around the universe? I better be a big-time surfer in one of them. And a world-class pianist in another."

"Face it," Sofia said with a smirk. "You're a no-talent bum in all of them, just like you are here. Or, there. Or, whatever."

Paul stuck out his tongue. "Sis, you're hilarious."

"Call me 'sis' again," Sofia challenged, raising her fist.

"Sis."

Sofia pulled back and punched Paul solidly on his upper arm with a loud thump.

"Ow!" he yelled, rubbing the spot. "That's no fair. I can't punch a *girl* back."

Tick laughed, and Mothball surprised everyone when she did, too.

"Glad my pain can give everyone a nice chuckle," Paul said, still wincing. "Tick, a word of advice. Don't mess with Italians."

"I learned that just from her e-mails. Whatever you do, don't rip on her spaghetti."

"Tick," Sofia said. "I like you. You're smart . . . for an American."

Sato completely ignored all of them, never breaking his stoic expression.

Before anyone could throw out another sarcastic remark, Mothball stopped next to a big pile of fallen branches and twigs. She turned toward the messy heap and took a deep breath. "'Ere we are." She bent over and yanked on a large branch, pulling it off the stack. "A little 'elp would be nice."

Tick grabbed a branch and everyone joined in, even Sato, who was mumbling something Tick couldn't understand.

Tick saw a glimmer of metal when he pulled off a prickly branch, his curiosity increasing his pace. Soon, they'd cleared the entire pile, and all of them stared at what they'd uncovered.

Three sleek and shiny motorcycles were lined up in a row, silver with sparkly metallic red paint. They were the coolest things Tick had ever seen, but there was one thing about them that seemed a little odd.

None of them had wheels.

Chi'karda Drive

They're called Windbikes," Mothball said, gesturing with a wide sweep of her arm. "Quite fun, they are." Everything about the strange vehicles looked exactly like a normal bullet bike you'd see zooming down the freeway: a small windshield, silvery handlebars, shiny body with a big black leather seat. But the machine ended in a flat bottom instead of two round wheels.

"I hate to break it to you," Paul said, "but somebody, uh, stole the *tires*."

Mothball laughed, a booming roar that bounced off the overhanging branches. "You're a funny little man, you are, Paul."

"Are you telling us these things . . . fly?" Sofia asked.

"Well, I'd hope so, what with them not having wheels and all. Come on," she said while pulling the bike on the end away from the rest, pushing it across the ground. "There's three. One for me, and two for you kiddies to share. Methinks you'll be better off if ya go in pairs."

"Not me," Sato said. "I go alone."

"You'll go in a pair," Mothball said. "Or you'll sit 'ere and hug this tree all day." She stared down at Sato, daring him to argue. He said nothing in reply.

It was the first time Tick had seen Mothball use her size to intimidate someone. *I have a feeling this lady is a lot tougher than she acts.*

"Sweet biscuits!" Paul said as he grabbed hold of the next Windbike and dragged it a few feet away. "You're serious? This thing really *flies*? In the air?"

"Where else would it fly, Einstein?" Sofia said. "Underground?"

"You got me there, Miss Italy," Paul said, seeming to have grown accustomed to Sofia's smart mouth. "How does it work?"

Mothball sat down on her bike, her body taking up the entire seat that was meant for two. "You push this 'ere button, which turns it on, like so." She pressed a red button on the small dashboard under the handlebars. The Windbike came to life, humming like a big computer and not like a normal motorcycle at all. "Doesn't use gasoline. Takes hydrogen right out of the moisture in the air, it does, burns it right nicely. Come on, get on, now!"

"Who's going with who?" Tick asked.

"I'll go with you or Paul," Sofia said. "But not *him*." She nodded toward Sato, who scowled back at her.

"I don't want to go with you, either."

“Alrighty then,” Paul said, clapping his hands. “Looks like it’s me and Sofia on this one, Tick and Sato on that one.” He pointed to the next bike in line.

Tick wanted to argue, but he didn’t really want Sato any angrier than he already was. He looked to Sofia for help, but she only shrugged, not bothering to hide the smirk on her face. “Uh, great, okay.”

Paul moved toward his bike and sat down right behind the handlebars, but Sofia would have none of it.

“I’m driving, tough guy,” she said, pushing him backward as she squirmed her way in front of him.

Paul held his hands up in surrender as he scooted to the rear of the big seat. “You win, Miss Italy, you win.” He looked over at Tick and mouthed the words, “*Help me.*”

Sato pulled the last Windbike upright and pushed the button to turn it on as he swung his leg over and sat down in the driver’s position. “Get on,” he said, not bothering to look at Tick.

Tick felt like he’d rather pound his head against the closest tree than get on the back of the humming machine. He hated how the mean kid from Japan was ruining everything.

Mothball must have noticed Tick’s hesitation. “Come, now. Time’s a wastin’, it is.”

“Yeah, sorry.” Tick sighed as he sat behind Sato. The bottom edge of the Windbike had a railing with sticky pads for his feet. “Is this another invention from the Fourth Reality? Wait, let me guess—Chu Industries?”

“Nailed that one, you did,” Mothball answered. “Chu rules a monopoly in the Fourth, he does—practically owns everything. Smuggled these bikes in a few months ago, we did, figuring they’d do right nicely for our little mission.”

“What do we do now?” Sofia asked.

“Watch me very closely,” Mothball said. She gripped the handlebars, then gently *lifted*, surprising everyone when the metal connecting her handgrips to the bike bent upward. As she did so, her Windbike rose several feet into the air with a slight surge in its humming sound; the top of her head almost bumped into a low-hanging branch.

“Cool!” Paul shouted.

Tick couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

“Your hands control everything,” Mothball said from above. “Push forward, go forward. The farther you push, the faster you go. Pull back and you slow down or stop, depending how hard ya do it. And ya go up or down by lifting and dropping the handgrips. Easy as breathin’, it is.”

Tick yelled and grabbed Sato’s shirt as their bike suddenly leaped into the

air and backward, then lurched forward and came to a sudden stop. A second later it shot forward again and flew around the closest tree, coming to a halt right above Sofia and Paul.

“It works,” Sato said in a deadpan voice.

At the same time, all of them laughed. Even Sato broke into a smile for the first time since they’d met, looking back at Tick just as it turned back into a frown.

Tick had the strange feeling that maybe he was glad Sato had taken the pilot’s seat after all, since he seemed to already have the hang of it. *I probably would’ve slammed us into the ground already, breaking all of our legs.*

Sofia tried it next, shooting straight upward until Paul’s head slammed into the branch overhead.

“Ow, watch it!” he screamed. “I’m *tall*, remember!”

“Sorry,” Sofia said through a snicker. Tick could see her push down and forward on the handlebars as the Windbike came down and flew around the same tree he and Sato had just circled. She came to a stop by pulling back with her hands, hovering right next to Tick.

“Told you it was easy, I did,” Mothball said. She revved her humming motorcycle. “Follow me!”

Her Windbike shot forward into the forest before she’d finished her sentence.

~

“You’re sure of the meeting time and place?” Mistress Jane asked from her perch on the throne, glancing at her brightly yellow painted fingernails one by one.

“Absolutely,” Frazier replied, trying his best to remain calm and professional, even though he knew how unpredictable his boss could be. He’d been put in charge of counter-spying on Annika since he’d returned and he had discovered some very interesting letters in the back of her closet. His relief at being right about her had far outweighed any fear he felt about damage she may have done. His hide had been saved and that was all that mattered.

“Tomorrow morning,” he said, looking at the floor. “Dawn. Where the river meets the Forest of Plague. Annika will take the Barrier Wand from your throne room while you sleep, then deliver it to the Realitants.”

“Why doesn’t she just wink away with it herself? Why all the *drama*?” Jane said the last word with a low and sarcastic drawl.

Frazier swallowed despite his dry mouth. “She’s under orders to keep her cover, stay infiltrated. Keep spying on you.”

“Perhaps we should hide the Wand, end the plan this very minute.” Jane lifted her hand and a small plate with a cup of steaming hot tea floated up from a nearby table and rested on her palm. She took a long and slurping drink.

“We could, Mistress, but then we might lose our chance to capture any Realitants who may have escaped George’s Command Center before your attack. If Annika is not there with the Barrier Wand, they might suspect something and flee before we arrive.”

“Frazier Gunn,” Jane said with a sneer as she leaned forward in her throne, dropping the plate and cup onto the floor with a wet crash. She took off her lemon-decorated hat to reveal the shiny bald scalp underneath. Frazier shivered, knowing she did this only when she wanted to threaten someone. “This is your chance to redeem your pathetic failure of not bringing me those kids the *first* time I asked you to. If you fail me again . . .”

“You have nothing to worry about, Mistress. I’ll have eyes on the Barrier Wand at all times and the army of fangen are ready to attack. Once the Realitants meet up with Annika, we’ll charge in and take them all. They’ll have nowhere to go.”

“Are you sure the fangen are reliable? Last time I checked, they were still developing, still blind as bats.”

Heat pulsed through Frazier’s veins. “They’re not at full strength, that’s true. But they’ll be plenty tough to take care of a few Realitants, I promise.”

Jane paused a moment, staring him down as she considered his plan. “Fine, Frazier. But I want you personally to check and double check that the Chi’karda Drive in the Wand is disengaged before tonight. In fact, take the thing out altogether and give it to me so I can sleep with it under my pillow. Without it, they won’t be able to wink away.”

“And Master George’s Wand? What if he tries to wink them back?”

Mistress Jane laughed as she placed the lemony hat back on her shiny head. “Oh, don’t worry about him. He’ll be far too *occupied* to do any rescuing.” Her face flashed to red as she screamed, “Nitwit! Clean up this mess!”

~

By the time Mothball finally stopped next to an oak tree the size of a small building, Tick was desperate to throw up. After all the dodging and weaving through the maze of trees in the forest, his insides felt as if someone had shaken them like a maraca. When Sato pulled to a stop and lowered the Windbike to the mossy floor, Tick jumped off and ran over to a clump of bushes, where he spewed out every last morsel remaining in his stomach.

Paul made a wisecrack, but by the looks of his green face, he didn’t feel

much better. Sofia and Sato seemed fine—as did Mothball—and Tick wondered if it was because they'd been driving.

Mothball removed her backpack and started pulling out all kinds of stuff. A tarp, some blankets, a little stove, packets of food.

“I thought we were in a hurry to meet our spy lady?” Paul asked, still walking off his nausea.

“What's that?” Mothball asked, concentrating on setting up the stove. “Oh, no, that be tomorrow morning when we meet Annika.”

“Then why all the rush?” Sofia asked.

“Wanted to get far away from the deadies, I did.” Mothball shivered. “The battleground where all those people died is downright spooky if ya ask me. Thought it best to be away a bit before we set up camp.”

“So what do we do all night?” Paul asked as he leaned over Mothball's shoulder, not bothering to hide his interest in whatever she planned on cooking.

“Eat up, we will. Rutger prepared some right tasty dinners. Rest a bit, get some sleep. We'll be meetin' Annika just as the sun comes up, down by where the river that flows through Mistress Jane's fortress comes out and hits the Forest of Plague.”

“How do we know for sure she'll be there?” Sato asked, still sitting on his Windbike. “Maybe she's turned on you.”

“She'll be there, Mister Sato, no worries.” Mothball ripped open a silvery pack of goop and poured it into a pot on her small stove. “One of our finest, Annika is.”

“What if she's been captured?” Sato persisted.

“Then ya better be prayin' Master George survived his little battle and brings us back.”

Tick sat down on a fallen log, unhappy that they had hurried to get here only to sit and wait for tomorrow. It was going to be a long night.

~

“Here you are, Mistress.”

Frazier handed over the cylindrical pack of wires, nanochips, and instruments that made up the Chi'karda Drive, the heart and soul of her Barrier Wand.

Jane took the odd-looking package through her open bedroom door, examining it as though she suspected it wasn't the real thing. “You put the Wand back where it always rests for the night?”

“Yes, I did. The trap is set.”

“I can't wait to find out why Annika has betrayed me,” Jane said with a

nasty smile. “How fun it will be to remind her why it’s best to be on *my* side of things.”

“Loads,” Frazier muttered, almost forgetting himself. “The fangen are ready, Mistress, and are already moving into their hiding positions.”

“That should be an interesting sight to watch—they sniffing along, bumping into things.” Jane pointed a finger through the crack of the door. “Remember, we need the Realitants alive. This is the perfect opportunity for me to learn what that weasel George is planning.”

“Yes, Mistress Jane,” Frazier said. “The fangen will be very . . . eager, but I’ll do my best to restrain them.”

~

The night was dark and cool, and Tick slept surprisingly well until Mothball shook him awake a couple of hours before dawn. He jumped at first, but his senses came back to him quickly.

“Time to be movin’, it is,” she whispered, then moved on to the next person.

They’d all slept on a wide blue tarp, each one of them given a single blanket to make it through the night. Tick had never felt *too* cold, and the soft undergrowth of the forest floor made for a nice mattress. All in all, he felt well rested once he got up and his blood started flowing.

After a quick breakfast of granola bars and apples, a unified hush settled on everyone as they helped Mothball pack up her things and stuff them into the backpack. The forest was mostly quiet, the occasional buzz of an insect or howl of an animal in the distance the only sounds.

Tick didn’t know if he’d ever felt butterflies so intense as he did at that moment, waiting to hop back on his Windbike and fly off to meet Annika the spy. From what he’d heard about Mistress Jane, he doubted she would be very merciful if they blew the mission and got captured. What if Sato was right? What if this was all a trap? What if something went wrong? Tick tried not to think about his fears, putting his trust in Mothball and Master George.

“Everyone, gather ’round,” Mothball said once she’d swung the backpack onto her shoulders. They moved together into a tight circle, intently awaiting instructions. “Just yonder there’s a small break in the trees. Once there, we’re going to fly up and over the roof of the forest to make it easy goin’. Just follow me, and we’ll make our way to the meetin’ point by the river. Once Annika comes with the Barrier Wand, we’ll scuttle away right quick and head back for the old battleground in the forest. Got it?”

“Yeah,” whispered Paul. “Sounds pretty easy to me.”

“What do we do if something goes wrong?” Sato asked, seeming to show a little more interest in the group. “What is—how do you say?—our Plan B?”

“Yeah, what if this Annika lady doesn’t get the Wand to us?” Paul asked.

Mothball paused. “Then we fly like the dickens back to the battleground to regroup.”

“Why do I *not* feel assured this has all been thought out?” Sofia asked.

“Annika’s been preppin’ for months for this, she ’as,” Mothball replied. “But if we don’t get the ruddy Wand, won’t matter much in the end. If we’re to have any ’ope of defeatin’ the Mistress, we need to trap her ’ere for a long time.”

“Then let’s do it,” Paul said, holding his hand out, palm to the ground.

Tick got the idea and did the same, putting his hand on top of Paul’s. Sofia followed suit, then Mothball. Everyone looked at Sato, whose face was hidden in the darkness. After a long pause, he finally gave in, placing his hand on top of the pile.

“Promise me,” he said looking around the circle. “Promise me you people won’t betray me.”

His words surprised Tick, and by the shocked silence from his friends, he figured they were just as taken back.

“Promise me!” Sato yelled.

“Just who do you think—” Sofia began.

“No,” Mothball said, cutting her off. “Sato ’ere had a bit of trouble in his past. Right deserving of his doubts, he is. Sato, I promise I won’t be the one doin’ any betraying. You can bet yer best buttons on that one.”

“Me, neither,” Paul quickly added. “Sato, we’re in this together, man.”

“Yeah,” Tick agreed. “We’re not going to betray you.”

“And you?” Sato said to Sofia.

“I think you need an attitude—”

“Sofia!” Tick snapped, surprising himself.

She paused for a long time. “All right, all right. Sato, I promise I won’t betray you, even though that sounds really lame. We’re all a team, here. *Okay?*” She said the last word sarcastically, as if to preserve her dignity. “Can we quit holding hands now?”

“On three,” Paul said, ignoring her. “On three, yell . . . *Go Realitants.*”

“Oh, come on,” Sofia complained.

“Just do it,” Paul replied. “Pump us up for some prime-time action and adventure. Ready?” He bobbed his hand up and down as he counted. “One . . . two . . . three . . . GO REALITANTS!” He threw everyone’s hands up in the air as he shouted the last part with enthusiasm.

Tick and Mothball half-heartedly said the words with him, but Sato and Sofia didn’t make a peep.

“Man, you guys are pathetic,” Paul muttered.

“Let’s just get on with it, Cheeseball,” Sofia said. “Let’s go get us a Barrier Wand.”

And with that, they got on their bikes and flew toward the tops of the trees.



Annika's Toss

The dark sky had the slightest hint of purple as the Realitants shot out of the forest and skimmed along the canopy of trees, following Mothball in the lead. Tick knew he should be terrified, but he already felt completely confident in the workings of the Windbikes; they seemed invincible and effortless. The dark and puffy roof of the forest below them looked like a churning sea of storm clouds, making him feel higher in the sky than a few hundred feet. It was a little awkward holding onto Sato at first, but he enjoyed the rush of speed and the whipping wind.

For the first time in his life, he knew what it felt like to be Superman.

They traveled for a half hour before Mothball held up her hand to signal the others to slow down. The black purple of the sky had slowly brightened into a mixture of oranges and reds, streaks of fiery clouds scratched across it. Tick could see that the main forest ended a mile or so ahead, and almost swallowed his tongue when he saw what towered above the land beyond.

It was a massive fortress of stone and rock, still dark against the scant light of dawn. Dozens of towers and bridges dotted its skyline. It had to be the single largest structure Tick had ever seen—bigger by *far* than even the Seahawks' football stadium. It appeared that not only had Mistress Jane discovered a land full of something like magic, she'd set herself up in a castle fit for a king from any fantasy book in the library. Tick was in awe and had the sudden urge to explore the place.

The three Windbikes hovered next to each other, everyone in stunned silence as they gawked at the castle of Mistress Jane.

"Calls it the Lemon Fortress, she does," Mothball said. "Why that woman loves the color yellow so much is beyond me. Looney, she is."

"Are we sure they can't see us?" Paul asked.

"Not sure at all. Come on, down we go. Got to be about our business." She pushed on her handlebars and flew toward the edge of the forest, the other two Windbikes right behind her.

They passed over the green cliff of the tightly packed trees and descended toward the ground, where a lush lawn of grass and wildflowers was sliced by the sinewy curve of a huge, sparkling blue river that spilled out from underneath the castle before finally disappearing into the forest. Not a person was in sight, and in a matter of seconds, the group had settled on the ground

next to the deep, slowly moving waters, close enough to the trees to smell bark and pine.

“Where is Annika?” Sofia asked, not bothering to hide the frustration in her voice.

“Be along directly, she will,” Mothball replied, but her face showed signs of worry as she stared at the Lemon Fortress with a creased brow.

From where they waited, they could see a cobblestone path running along the river and up to a large double-doored entrance of the castle, just a few hundred feet away. Next to it, the river seemed to magically appear from nowhere, bubbling up from under the cold blocks of the castle’s granite. At the moment, not a thing stirred anywhere except for the trickling river and the early-rising birds of the forest.

Tick was about to say something when Mothball shushed him, holding up a hand as she perked her ears, looking around for signs of mischief. At first, Tick couldn’t hear anything, but then the faintest sound of giggling and high-pitched chatter came from everywhere at once, bouncing along the lawn in front of them and from the trees behind them.

“What *is* that?” Paul whispered.

The creepy cacophony of hoots and howls and wicked laughter grew louder.

“That can’t be good,” Sofia muttered, her eyes wide in her frightened face. “Mothball, what’s going on?”

“Methinks we’ve been found out, I do,” she answered, standing to get a better look at the Lemon Fortress. “Sounds like the fangen to me, and they be comin’ fast. We may have to fight a bit after all. Don’t worry, the lugs are still blind and clumsy so all ya’ll need to do is move a lot and shoot ’em with these little gems.”

She pulled out several dark-green cylinders from a side pocket on her backpack and passed one to each of the kids. They were thin and several inches long, one end tapering to a point. Tick took his and examined the shiny surface, noticing a small button toward the thicker end.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“That there’s the Sound Slicer,” Mothball answered. “Point the narrowed bit at the beasties when they get close and push the button. Keep ’em off ya, it will.”

“What does it—” Sofia began.

Before she could finish her question, the sound of wood scraping against stone echoed through the air. Everyone turned in unison to see the wide double doors of the castle opening outward like the gaping jaws of a monster. The seam in the middle had barely grown a foot wide before a woman with long black hair shot out of it, dressed in a bright green dress, running with

strained and frantic effort. In her right hand, she held a long golden rod.

The Barrier Wand.

“It’s Annika!” Mothball roared as she jumped back onto her Windbike. “Quick! Fly to her—fly to her!”

She shot into the air and down the path of the river, toward the running woman, who kept looking behind her, terrified. She shouted something as she ran, but they were too far away to hear. As Tick scrambled onto the Windbike behind Sato, he saw tall, gangly figures pouring through the castle doors, more and more as the exit opened wider. He couldn’t tell what the creatures were, but they seemed . . . *wrong* somehow. They were basically human in shape, but all comparisons ended there.

Sato shot through the air and pulled up beside Mothball as they drew closer to Annika. “What are those things?” he yelled.

The creatures’ skin was a putrid hue of yellow, like they’d been infected with a horrible disease. Clumpy patches of hair sprang from their bodies in random places and they wore only scant, filthy clothing that looked like tattered sheets that barely covered their thick torsos. Their eyes were mere slits, burning red pupils peeping out like a glimpse of hot lava. And their mouths . . .

They were huge, full of pointy spikes of enormous teeth.

“Them’s the fangen,” Mothball shouted. “Nasty beasties, they are. But we can fight ’em off with a bit of effort.”

Even as she spoke, the hackles and cries from the fangen grew louder. Tick looked around in horror as he saw more of the sickly creatures appearing from everywhere, out of ditches, over the crests of the surrounding hills, out of the forest. They came from all directions, some bounding along on all four of their skinny arms and legs, others running upright; still others had *things* sprouting off their backs, membranous extensions resembling dirty sails, tautly flapping in the wind. With horror, Tick realized they were wings.

“By the way,” Mothball yelled, readying herself to dive for Annika. “Fangen can fly.”

~

High above the grounds, safe in her room, Mistress Jane sat next to the open air of her window, listening with glee to the horrific sounds of her attacking army. Amazing what the power of this twisted and evil Reality could create. This was her first practical use of the fangen. How wonderful.

But with so many against so few, it hardly seemed fair.

She looked down in her lap, where she cradled the Chi’karda Drive like a newborn baby. Without it, the pathetic band of Realitants could never use her Barrier Wand to escape. And she had already received word that Master

George's Wand had been damaged beyond repair in the battle at the Bermuda Triangle. Good news, all around.

She did feel a little saddened by Annika's betrayal. Jane had trusted her with so many trivial and demeaning duties. What a pity she'd have to be done away with.

Mistress Jane screamed for something to eat. She had a show to enjoy before she sat down to strategize for her meeting with Reginald Chu in a few days.

Her plan to make the universe a better place had officially begun.

~

Sofia had fallen far behind the other two Windbikes, too shocked by the sight of the onrushing creatures to push ahead any faster. She spun in a slow circle as she took it all in. The fangen were everywhere. The sight of the tall, awkward creatures, with their bony arms and legs attached to a thick, solid torso and their disgusting skin and patches of greasy hair, made her sick.

"Man, what are those things!" Paul shouted from behind her.

"Your long-lost cousins!" Sofia yelled back, knowing there couldn't possibly be a worst time to make a joke, but unable to stop herself.

"Hilarious—now hurry and catch up with Mothball!"

Sofia was about to push forward on the handlebars when something appeared right in front of them, shooting up from the ground.

One of the creatures, its enormous mouth baring fangs the size of small knives, hovered in midair, blocking their path. It looked hungry.

Sofia saw the wings for the first time, furred out behind the fangen like a horrific version of giant palm leaves.

From behind her, Paul suddenly screamed.

~

The fangen moved twice as fast as Annika could run, and they were almost on top of her as Mothball dove toward the ground like a hawk on a field mouse. Her heart hurt at seeing the terror on her old friend's face as she ran, the fierceness in Annika's eyes enough to turn water to stone. Mothball leaned on the handlebars, willing the Windbike to move faster. She wasn't close enough to use a Sound Slicer, and even if she were, she couldn't use it; the thing would turn Annika's brain to jelly.

A fangen jumped on Annika's back, throwing her to the ground. Annika rolled, gripping the Barrier Wand with both hands and swinging wildly. She hit the creature in the face, a strange bark coming out of its mouth as it reared back in pain. Annika scrambled to her feet and kept running, the horde of fangen right on her tail. The clumsy things constantly stumbled over each

other, but never lost ground due to sheer numbers.

Mothball was almost to Annika, screaming at her to keep running. Though Mothball was bigger than the usual rider of a Windbike—leaving no room for another passenger—she felt sure she could somehow lift Annika up and away from the monsters. Of course, the disgusting things could just leap into the air with their warped Chi’karda-melded wings, but she’d deal with one thing at a time.

About forty feet away, Mothball realized she was too late. Several fangen had caught up with Annika, flanking her to make sure she couldn’t fight her way out again. Her eyes met Mothball’s, and they seemed so full of fear that Mothball worried Annika might drop dead of it.

Determined to fight her way into the melee and save Annika and the Wand or die trying, Mothball surged forward.

She was almost there when Annika threw the Barrier Wand into the air as hard as she could, the shiny rod glistening in the morning sun as it windmilled end over end toward Mothball. An instant later, Annika disappeared under a mass of writhing yellow skin and claws.

Mothball reached out and caught the Wand with her right hand, screaming with fury at the beasts below her, knowing it was too late to save her friend.

~

Tick and Sato watched the entire ordeal play out from dozens of feet behind Mothball, flying in to help. Tick didn’t know if he should cheer or cry when their tall friend caught the Barrier Wand in her hand.

He had time to do neither.

A pack of three flying fangen attacked their Windbike in a swarm of sharp claws and spiky fangs and flapping wings.

~

Paul screamed when the claws raked down his back, trying not to picture in his mind what it had done to his skin. On instinct, he gripped Sofia harder for support and kicked behind him with his right leg. He felt a solid thump as his foot connected, followed by a hair-raising shriek that faded as the creature fell to the ground.

Sofia gunned the Windbike forward; it smashed into a flying fangen and sent it reeling to the side, hissing in frustration. Paul felt himself slipping backward and had to pull himself back onto the seat, all the while looking below them at the unbelievable sight. Everywhere he looked, more and more of the nightmarish creatures appeared, snapping at the air with their vicious fangs.

“Use the thing Mothball gave us!” Sofia yelled from up front, pulling it out

of her pocket as she spoke.

“Sound Slicer,” Paul whispered to himself as he grabbed his own.

Together, they aimed the little cylinders at the nearest pack of fangen and pushed the buttons. A low sound vibrated through the air, barely discernible but heavy, rattling Paul’s bones as if he’d been standing next to tolling cathedral bells. Below them, the fangen suddenly plummeted toward the ground like they’d been hit with an invisible tidal wave.

“Whoa,” Paul said.

In tandem, he and Sofia swept the area below them, firing the Sound Slicer at anything in sight. Hordes of fangen fell from the sky.

“Find Mothball!” Paul yelled in Sofia’s ear.

~

Tick had never really been in a fight his entire life. He’d always walked away from them or taken the punishment or *avoided* them. But now he had no choice. With one hand clutching Sato’s shirt, he punched and kicked with his other three limbs, thrashing wildly as he frantically tried to avoid the fangs and claws of the fangen.

Sato swerved back and forth with the Windbike, alternately accelerating and slamming on the brakes, popping up and down, trying his best to get away from their attackers. But for every one that fell away, two more seemed to show up.

Tick felt his elbow connect with something solid, heard an eerie yelp. His feet kicked away a fangen on each side of the bike at the same time. He punched another one square between the small slits of its eyes. More of the beasts swarmed in. Tick reached into his pocket and pulled out the cylinder he’d received from Mothball, only to have it knocked out of his hands, falling to the ground below.

He felt something sharp on his shoulder blade, turning around to see that one of the fangen had grabbed his scarf, pulling itself closer with jaws wide open. Tick had to let go of Sato with his other hand as he swung his elbow up and around as hard as he could, slamming it into the beast’s neck. It screamed and fell away.

At that very moment, Tick’s stomach shot up into his throat as the Windbike suddenly plummeted toward the ground. He just barely grabbed the edges of the seat, turning toward the front of the bike.

His heart skittered when he saw that Sato had *disappeared*.

He looked up just in time to see two fangen flying away, Sato firmly in the grasp of their claws.

~

Double Doors

Frazier Gunn watched the action from his perch high atop the walls of the Lemon Fortress. Seeing the swarms of fangen descend on the few Realitants—especially the big one who'd kidnapped him in the Alaskan cemetery—gave him a grim sense of satisfaction.

His place in Mistress Jane's hierarchy would surely skyrocket after this victory.

He saw the tall woman, grasping the useless Barrier Wand, dodging and weaving through hundreds of fangen as she tried to escape. He worried slightly she might break it—even though it couldn't be used without the Chi'karda Drive, the shell itself was a complex instrument in its own right that would take months to replace—but the army of creatures had direct orders to retrieve it safe and sound. Everything would be fine.

Surprised by a sudden yawn, Frazier decided he'd had enough; the fangen were already boring him. He turned around and went back into the castle proper, hoping Mistress Jane might call on him for congratulations very soon.

~

Tick knew Sato's fate was sealed if Tick couldn't gain control of the Windbike before it crashed into the ground below. The bike twisted and pitched back and forth as it fell, throwing his senses into complete chaos. He steeled himself, forcing his eyes and hands to focus on the leather seat, pulling himself toward the handlebars. Though he didn't dare look, he could *feel* the lawn and river rushing up to smash him to bits. He only had seconds to live unless he . . .

With one last grunt, he yanked himself upright and squeezed his legs on both sides of the bike's body. He quickly grabbed the handlebars and bent them toward the sky. With a lurch that almost made his stomach implode, the Windbike slowed to a halt then shot straight back up into the air. As dozens of fangen repositioned themselves to attack him again, Tick looked in the direction Sato had been taken. He could just see his flailing body, resisting the two creatures that'd whisked him away.

They were on a direct course for the top of the castle.

In the next instant, a million thoughts seemed to flow through Tick's mind, processing and reprocessing.

A few months ago, he'd made a very difficult decision. Even though his life had become frightening—just as Master George had promised it would—and even though he could've made it all go away with a simple toss of the first letter into the fire, he hadn't done it. Some courage he didn't know he'd had, some sense of duty and right he didn't know was so powerful, had swelled inside his heart and given him the conviction to make an extremely hard choice. He remembered thinking of his little sister Kayla, and what he might do if her life were at stake.

And now, truly for the first time in his existence, Tick had a chance to risk his own life to save another.

The question posed by Master George so long ago popped back into his mind.

Will you have the courage to choose the difficult path?

Tick screamed Sato's name and slammed the handlebars up and forward, bulleting the Windbike in a straight path toward the fangen. Toward Sato.

~

Sofia continued to fly the Windbike as crazy as she dared, swerving and diving and skyrocketing upward in an attempt to evade the countless creatures coming after them. Her head hurt from the effort; her stomach begged her to stop.

Behind her, Paul continued to shoot as many fangen as he could with his Sound Slicer, defending her as she drove. He'd slipped and almost fallen several times, but she had no choice but to keep flying forward.

She caught a glimpse of Tick streaking past her on his Windbike.

Alone.

Where was—

Before she could finish her thought, one of the flying creatures slammed into them from the side, driving its head into the engine of the bike. Sofia lurched, barely hanging on as the body of the beast flipped under them and fell to the ground.

She felt Paul squirming behind her to right himself on the seat. "What was that thing *doing?*" he asked.

Unfortunately, they got their answer a second later.

With a loud sputter of electronic coughs, then a low whine that sounded like a baby elephant caught in a trap, the Windbike quit working. Completely.

This time, Sofia and Paul screamed in unison as they dropped toward the ground far below.

~

Tick had halved the distance to Sato and his captors in a matter of seconds. Even though they could fly, the fangen were no match for the Windbikes when it came to speed.

Tick leaned forward, keeping his eyes focused on his target.

He tried not to think of what would happen if they suddenly decided to drop Sato.

~

Mothball used the Barrier Wand like a staff, swinging it in wide arcs as she darted about on her Windbike, knocking the heads of the fangen, sometimes two or three at a time. She realized they'd be in a whole heap of mess if she broke the ruddy Wand, but Master George had always said the things were sturdy enough to withstand most punishment.

She'd just landed a particularly nice hit on a creature when she caught a flicker of dark movement to her right. She looked to see Paul and Sofia—and their bike—plummeting toward the ground.

She zoomed in that direction without an instant's hesitation.

~

Sofia's Windbike sputtered sporadically, humming to life with a jolt for the briefest of moments before dying again. Paul hugged Sofia tightly from behind, probably hoping she'd never bring it up again should they somehow survive.

But Sofia knew they'd be dead in seconds, and wondered what life as a Realitant might've been like. She thought she might have liked it.

~

Mothball didn't have time to think or ponder several options. Only one made sense, and she went for it, quickly stuffing the Barrier Wand through a belt loop with one hand while she steered with the other.

In a nosedive that made her eyes water, she rushed toward Sofia and Paul, who clung to their useless Windbike as it plummeted in a downward spiral. Their present course would smash them against a group of boulders clustered close to the river. Mothball intended to *change* that course.

At the last second before she caught up with the falling bike, Mothball swerved hard to the right then arrowed back in straight at Sofia and Paul, keeping pace with their rate of descent, knowing she only had one shot. As soon as she made contact, Mothball gunned her own Windbike, *pushing* the other one at an angle as it fell.

Toward the river.

What had been certain death was now a chance.

If the ruddy water was *deep* enough.

~

Tick flew up and over the stone parapet bordering the massive crown of the castle, then skimmed along the loose gravel covering the roof. The two fangen had touched down, folding their wings behind them; Sato was clutched between them, his head hanging low.

When they spotted Tick, the two fangen howled out a piercing cry, seeming to dare Tick to attempt a rescue. From both sides of the castle walls, more of the creatures charged in, hungry to join the fight.

Tick never slowed down.

“Sato!” he screamed. “Duck!”

The boy showed no signs he’d heard or even planned to do as he was told, but Tick knew he had no other choice. He leaned forward, trying to envision in his mind what he was about to do.

“Sato!” he screamed again, only thirty feet away. “Duck—NOW!”

To Tick’s relief, Sato buckled his legs and fell toward the roof, catching his captors by surprise. Though they didn’t let go, both fangen looked down at Sato, their attention diverted for an instant, their heads high enough to serve as a perfect target.

Tick yanked back and to the left on the handlebars, leaning hard to the left as the Windbike spun, slowing as the back end swerved around and slammed into the upper bodies of the two fangen. Tick felt a jolt of pain as one of the creatures bit at his right leg before it toppled over. Both of the horrible creatures let go of Sato, stunned by the sudden impact.

Tick steadied the Windbike and lowered it all the way to the loose rocks of the roof. “Get on!” he yelled. Dozens of fangen were charging right for them.

Sato was bruised and battered, his face still pale with the terror of being captured, but he crawled to the bike and pulled himself onto the seat, Tick helping him the last few inches.

Out of the corners of his eyes, Tick saw a blur of yellowed skin and vicious claws. He felt an icy touch on his elbow. Before anything could take hold, Tick shot the Windbike up and away from the sea of disgusting monsters.

A storm of fangen took flight in pursuit.

~

Paul had absolutely no idea what happened.

His mind had been fading, shutting down into a blissful state of unconsciousness so he didn’t have to feel the excruciating instant of pain

when his body smacked into the ground. But everything changed in a sudden rush of intense cold and wetness.

Water engulfed him, filling his lungs as he instinctively sucked in air at the shock of impact. As he felt his feet slam into the river bottom—hard enough to almost break his legs—he sputtered and coughed, his instincts trying to prevent him from taking another breath and killing himself. The next instant, he felt a massive arm grab him around the chest and pull him through the water.

But not up—not toward air.

The arm pulled him to the *side*, skimming his body along the sandy river bottom.

Paul had one moment to wonder if he was dead before everything grew very dark.

~

Tick shot into the open air away from the castle, his blood freezing at the sight of countless fangen everywhere. The air was full of them, defying gravity as they flew with their pale, weak-looking wings. More crawled and ran across the grounds, an endless army of ants. Not knowing where to go or what to do, Tick frantically searched the sky and the ground for any glimpse of his friends.

A flash of red far below caught his eye. One of the Windbikes, in the *river*. And no sign of anyone near it.

His heart sinking faster than he could ever fly, Tick slammed on the handlebars and catapulted toward the ground.

~

After swimming under the thick stone arch from which the slow-moving river exited the Lemon Fortress, Mothball kicked with all of her might toward the surface, dragging both Sofia and Paul in her arms. Desperate for air, she could only imagine how her two little friends were doing, if they still lived.

Her head broke through the surface with a loud splash; she sucked in the most refreshing breath of her life. Even as she did so, she pulled up with her arms, bringing Paul and Sofia's faces above the water line.

Mothball's heart almost leaped out of her chest when both of the kids coughed and sputtered for air. With an inexplicable laugh, she dragged them to the side of the river where she helped them climb out and onto a wide stone walkway. Paul fell over, spitting and sucking, spitting and sucking. Sofia seemed better, taking in slow, deep breaths as she looked around, her eyes wide.

They stood next to the river in a long, dark tunnel that delved in one

direction for what seemed like eternity, no end in sight. On the other side, the river disappeared under a thick stone wall, flowing outside the castle wall. Next to that stood the huge wooden doors they'd seen from the outside. They were still halfway open and letting in enough light to prevent them from being in complete darkness.

"This is where those creatures came from," Sofia whispered.

"Best be glad they're out there, now," Mothball muttered. She pulled the Barrier Wand out of the huge belt loop where she'd stuck it for safekeeping.

Paul had recovered enough to stand up, his chest still heaving as he fought to catch his breath. "What happened to Tick and Sato?"

As if in answer, they heard Tick shout from outside the doors. "Mothball!"

His Windbike had flown down from somewhere above; he hovered just outside, Sato on the back.

"Wait a minute," Paul said. "I thought Sato was driving the bike."

"Quick!" Mothball yelled, ignoring Paul. "Get in 'ere!"

She saw Tick obey immediately, shooting the Windbike through the narrow space between the half-open doors. Even as he did, Mothball grabbed the long ropes hanging on the inside of the huge slabs of wood that served as handles to pull them closed.

"Help me!" she yelled.

As the others moved to her side and pulled with her, Mothball looked outside. Just before the doors slammed shut with a loud boom, she saw the hideous sight of countless fangen charging directly for them.

The Golden Button

Mothball pulled an enormous plank of wood down into the slot that locked the double doors. “Won’t hold ’em for long, bet yer best buttons.” She looked at Tick, who’d parked the Windbike and now hugged his friends like they’d just won the Cricket tourney. “Save the celebratin’ if you don’t mind. Here.” She held up the Barrier Wand, gesturing for him to take it.

“What?” Tick stammered. “Here? Now?”

“Less you’d be wantin’ to invite the fangen in first.”

Tick frowned. “But I thought we had to get back to the battleground.”

Something heavy slammed into the doors from the other side, followed by a thunder of heavy thumps and nerve-grinding scratches. The fangen wanted *in*.

“Only if we’d be wantin’ Master George to grab us in a few hours,” Mothball said. “No time for that now. It’s up to you.”

Without waiting for a response, she tossed the Wand in Tick’s direction.

~

Tick caught the long golden rod with both hands, scared to death he’d drop it and break it. He hefted it in his hands, surprised at how light it felt.

“So . . . I just have to adjust the controls and poof—we’re safe?” he asked Mothball.

“Be quick about it—and make no mistakes on the dials or we may end up in the wrong end of a beluga whale, we will. Once you’re set, we all need to be touchin’ it, then ya simply push the button.”

A crashing thunk made them all jump. Tick saw the head of a huge axe embedded in the wood of the right door. With an ear-piercing squeal, the huge sliver of metal was yanked back out. A second later it landed again, throwing a shower of splinters all over the stone walkway. It disappeared and a red eye peeked through the rough slit, followed by a gurgly scream.

“Uh, Tick,” Sofia said. “Maybe we should, I don’t know, *hurry*?” She threw every ounce of sarcasm she could muster into the last word.

“Yeah, man,” Paul agreed. “Giddyup.”

“They’re almost through . . .” Sato said, his voice taut.

“Okay,” Tick whispered as he knelt down on the stone, holding the Barrier Wand in front of him delicately, like he held in his hands the most priceless

artifact of the ancient Egyptians. “Here goes nothing.”

More booms and cracks sounded from the doors. More cackles and deranged giggling. The left door started to buckle, like the fangen had just hit it with a huge battering ram.

“Take your time, Tick,” Sofia muttered.

Tick ignored her, closing his eyes and bringing up the image of what Master George had shown him back at the Bermuda Triangle complex. He raised his mind’s eye to look at the Doohickey, the uppermost control.

“Okay,” he said, opening his eyes to focus on the real thing. While holding the rod with his left hand, he reached forward and turned the Doohickey three clicks to the right. He paused again, knowing it was better to get it right the first time instead of rushing and having to start all over again. He envisioned the Whatchamacallit, then the Thingamajig, slowly making the appropriate adjustments. He moved his attention to the next control down.

An ear-splitting crack made him yelp, looking up to see a huge seam had split the right door into almost two complete sections. Several yellowy arms squirmed through the opening, grasping and clawing to pull the pieces apart.

Tick, spurred into a fear-induced sense of focus, went back to work on the Barrier Wand.

~

“The water ruined the ruddy Sound Slicers, no doubt,” Mothball said as she ran forward to the doors, picking up a huge splinter of wood that had fallen inward onto the stone floor. She immediately got to work, whacking and stabbing any sign of the diseased yellow skin that squeezed through the large crack. With every shriek and scream of anger, she doubled her efforts.

Paul joined her, finding a smaller but sharper stick. Without a word to each other, they worked in tandem—Paul fighting the lower portion, Mothball the upper.

They only had to buy Tick a little more time.

~

Sofia felt rooted to the ground, screaming inside with helplessness. Sato stood beside her, frantically looking around as if trying to find something to fight.

“What happened out there?” Sofia asked him.

Sato looked at her, his eyes drained of the hatred and mistrust he’d shown back at Master George’s place. “He saved my life.” Sato pointed at Tick.

“He did?”

Sato nodded.

“That’s—” Sofia shrieked as something grabbed her ankle. She looked down to see a slick yellowed hand gripped around her, attached to one of the fangen, crawling out of the river. Behind it she saw another’s head pop out of the water.

Before she could react, Sato kicked down with his foot, breaking the miserable thing’s hand with a hideous crunch. It squealed and splashed back into the water, just as Sato got down on his knees and shot the other one with a muted *thump* from his Sound Slicer. The creature disappeared into the black water.

Sofia reached down and helped Sato back to his feet, then dragged him away from the river, seeing no signs of other creatures—for the moment.

The breaches in the doors were cracking wider, almost big enough for one of the monsters to squeeze through. A sickly arm reached inside, a glimmering silvery globe clutched in its hand. Sofia was about to shout a warning when Mothball whacked the thing’s arm with her huge stick.

The tall woman turned around, her face on fire with rage, yelling at the others. “Run away from the door! All of you!”

~

Paul didn’t argue, turning immediately to run down the dark tunnel. He grabbed Tick’s arm as he passed, half dragging him along since Tick was still focused intently on the Barrier Wand.

“Come on!” Paul yelled. “We need to get out of their reach or they’re going to fry us for dinner. Just a little farther in!”

Tick finally snapped his concentration and broke into a full run behind Paul. “I’ve almost got it,” he said, panting. “Just one more dial.”

The last word had barely crossed his lips when a horrible explosion of cracking wood boomed and echoed down the dark stone tunnel. The silver ball had been some kind of bomb.

The breach was complete.

~

Tick tried to ignore the noise of screaming and howling fangen pouring through the shattered doors behind them. Knowing he had no time left, he quit running and knelt down again, bringing the Barrier Wand up to his eye level. “Everyone come here!” he shouted. “Grab the Wand!”

He focused on the bottom dial—the Whattzit. He turned it to the correct position, then glanced over the other six controls, verifying each of them one last time. The other Realitants had gathered around him, leaning over to grasp the Wand in different locations, being careful not to cover up or bump the dials and switches.

The nightmarish sounds of the onrushing fangen grew louder. Sato used his free hand to shoot with his Sound Slicer, keeping some of them at bay, but Tick knew it was only a matter of time.

“Everyone ready?” Tick shouted over the cackles and war cries of the fangen and the teeth-jolting thumps of Sato’s lone weapon.

“Do it!” Mothball answered for everyone. “Be quick about it!”

Unable to prevent a smile from spreading across his face, Tick pushed the golden button on top of the Barrier Wand.

Nothing happened.

The haunting chorus of horrible sounds continued. Tick and the others were still trapped inside the Lemon Fortress.

Tick pushed the button again, then again, triggering his finger up and down several times.

Nothing.

“What’s *wrong*, Tick?” Sofia yelled.

“Dude, hurry up!” Paul added.

Tick ignored them, studying the controls to see if he’d made a mistake. One by one, he quickly scanned them, matching their positions with the image burned inside his mind. Everything was right.

He pushed the button again, with the same result.

No, no, no, he thought. *Not after all we just went through. You will work. You will work!*

“Tick!” Sofia yelled, swatting him on the shoulders in panic.

Tick could hear the creatures coming, could *feel* them.

Focusing, funneling the surroundings out of his mind and heart, Tick gripped the Barrier Wand, staring at it like he could melt it with his eyes. *They’d come so far . . .*

He felt that strange reservoir of heat deep in his stomach bubbling to life. He’d tapped into it twice before and now he reached for it eagerly, letting the warmth flood through his entire body, filling him with certainty.

Tick shouted into the air, louder than he’d ever shouted anything in his whole life.

“YOU WILL WORK YOU STUPID PIECE OF HUNK-A-JUNK!”

He closed his eyes and pushed the button one last time.

Tick instantly felt a tingle shoot down his back and the world around him fell into dead silence.

The Calm after the Storm

What do you mean, it *worked*?”

Mistress Jane glared at Frazier Gunn, who knelt before her chair by the window, like a criminal begging for his life. Surprisingly, Jane felt more intrigued than angry about this new development. Maybe she would let Gunn live after all.

“I don’t know how it happened, Mistress,” Gunn grumbled, sweat covering his face. “The Realitants disappeared and took the Barrier Wand with them.”

Jane reached over and lifted the Chi’karda Drive from where she’d placed it on the stone ledge of the windowsill. “*How*, exactly, could they do that when I’m holding the heart of the Wand in my hands?”

“George must’ve winked them out somehow.” Gunn kept his eyes fixed on the floor.

“Impossible,” Jane said immediately. “I have firsthand reports that George’s Wand broke in half. Plus, *you’re* the one who said their plan was to go back to the ancient Plague battlefield and get winked hours from now.”

“Then how did—”

“SILENCE!” Jane had endured this stupid man for quite long enough. “Leave me. I don’t want to see you for a very long time.” She dismissed him with a wave of her hand.

“Yes, Mistress.”

Jane watched him get to his feet and shuffle away, murmuring incessantly his thanks for her gracious decision to let him live. He was lucky—losing the Wand was a major loss; its parts and mechanisms were equally as important as the Chi’karda Drive itself—but she had much more important things flying through the recesses of her brilliant mind.

How had they done it? How had they manipulated the Chi’karda powerfully enough without the Drive? And in the heart of her personal fortress at that? Did it have something to do with the twisted version of the mysterious force that existed in the Thirteenth Reality? Jane tapped a sharp fingernail against her lips, thinking.

Did one of those bratty kids have some kind of special power over the Chi’karda? Many questions indeed.

The implications were vast, the possibilities endless.

Despite the setback, Mistress Jane smiled.

~

To any outside observer, it would have seemed as though Tick and his friends had just won the Super Bowl, the World Series, and the NBA Championship in one fell swoop. Having been through so much, and after having hundreds of creepy yellow fangen within inches of tearing them to pieces, winking away to complete safety seemed reason enough to jump up and down, screaming and hugging and cheering and then to start all over again.

“What took you so long!” Paul yelled, whacking Tick on the back with a huge smile on his face.

“I was trying to decide if I wanted to take you or leave you behind,” Tick replied, grinning.

They celebrated inside a room very similar to the one they’d left in the Bermuda Triangle, though a much smaller version—a couple of couches, a chair, a cold brick fireplace. A single window was placed directly across from the fireplace, and it looked out upon a dry palette of colors—oranges, reds, browns.

Tick brought his giddiness back to reason and walked over to get a better look at the view. Beyond their room was a huge drop-off that led to a brown strip of river far below. Sheer walls of striated rock rose up from the valley on all sides, stretching in all directions as far as Tick could see. *This* was the satellite location Master George had said he’d send them to?

It was a canyon. No, it was *the* canyon.

“Are we inside the Grand Canyon?” he asked to no one in particular.

“That we are,” Mothball answered. “This big crack’s brimming over with Chi’karda, it is.”

“Then where are Master George and Rutger?” Sofia asked.

A fallen mood filled the room like a sluggish oil spill, and no one said a word.

~

Master George worked furiously on his Barrier Wand, welding and wiring and hammering. He and Rutger had managed to repel the attack from Mistress Jane with an odd assortment of weapons, but not before the creatures had smashed his Wand in half with an axe. At least they’d missed severing the Chi’karda Drive.

Knowing his deadline to pull the Realitants out of the Thirteenth Reality was only a couple of hours away, he wiped the sweat off his brow and doubled his efforts.

“Master George!” Rutger yelled from the other room, followed by the

quick series of heavy thumps that always marked the little man running on his short legs.

“What is it, Rutger?” Master George asked, annoyed. “Can’t you see I’m under considerable duress?”

His friend stopped in the doorway, panting like he’d just run three miles. “Master George!”

“Speak, man, and be quick about it!”

“The nanolocators . . . Mothball, Tick . . . everyone—they winked to our station at the Canyon!”

His old friend’s news made Master George regret the harshness of his words. “That’s wonderful, Rutger! Wonderful, indeed!” He went back to work on the Wand, very encouraged indeed.

~

Three hours after Tick and the others arrived at the Grand Canyon—three long and boring but happy hours—Master George and Rutger suddenly appeared by the fireplace without any warning, disheveled and dirty, but faces beaming.

Tick didn’t know how to react; he felt shocked, relieved, elated, confused. He jumped up from the couch, his emotions swirling from all the highs and lows he’d felt since he’d awakened that morning. Mistress Jane’s Barrier Wand lay on the couch next to him and he picked it up, excited to show Master George, who was already talking a mile a minute.

“I can hardly believe my eyes, old chaps! You did it, you really did it, indeed! I couldn’t be more delighted if Muffintops bore twelve kittens this very instant. Why, I—” He stopped, catching sight of the now-filthy and battered Wand in Tick’s hands. “Master Atticus, I simply *knew* you were up to the task. Congratulations to all of you.” He focused on the Wand, holding his hands out timidly. “May I, er, see it?”

Tick handed over the golden cylinder, glad to be rid of it.

As soon as Master George took it in his hands, he frowned, his brow crinkling in confusion. “Why, it’s so . . . *light*. Has Mistress Jane altered the construction somehow?” He turned the Wand over and unscrewed the bottom until it popped off. He then held the now-open cylinder up to his eye like a telescope, closing his other eye as he examined its insides.

Master George dropped the Wand to his side, a look of complete bewilderment on his face.

“What’s the matter?” Mothball asked. “Look like a mum what’s lost her kiddies, ya do.”

Master George looked at Tick, dark thunderclouds gathering in his eyes.

“What?” Tick asked, taking a step back.

“Have you taken any pieces out of this Wand?” Master George asked, his tone accusatory.

“Huh?” Tick looked over at Sofia, then Paul. Both of them shrugged their shoulders. “No. I didn’t even know you could open it up.”

Master George looked like he didn’t believe him. “Young man, you are telling me you used *this* Barrier Wand to wink yourself and these good people to this place?”

“Um . . . yes, sir,” Tick stammered, worried he was in serious trouble.

Master George harrumphed and paced around the room, mumbling to himself, throwing his arms up in frustration as if he were in a great argument. He looked like a gorilla on a rampage.

“What in the name of Reality Prime’s wrong with ya, Master George?” Mothball asked.

Master George stopped, turning sharply to face the group. “My dear fellow Realitants—because you are all most certainly full-fledged members now—you have all witnessed something that could very well change the Realities forever. Tick, my good man, have you ever had anything remarkable happen before in your life? Something quite . . . miraculous, if you will?”

“Why? What do you mean?” Tick thought of the incident with the letter from Master George that Kayla had burned, and its magical return as though it had never happened. But he didn’t want to say anything about it, feeling suddenly very embarrassed and confused.

“I don’t *know* what I mean, actually,” Master George said. “But you’ve just done something that defies logic.”

“What are you talking about?” Paul asked. “What did Tick do?”

Master George held up the Barrier Wand for everyone to look at. “This Wand is *missing* its Chi’karda Drive.” He paused, waiting for a response, as if he’d just revealed a mystery recipe stolen from the Keebler elves, but only Mothball and Rutger reacted, exchanging a startled glance with each other before turning to stare at Tick.

“Good people, this thing is completely useless without the Drive. It cannot *work* without the Drive. Better off using a turnip to wink between Realities.”

Tick was stunned, his mind on the cusp of realizing what had happened, but resisting its huge implications.

“Then how did Tick make it work?” Sofia asked.

“I have no idea! All I know is that the only way he could’ve winked here is by a deliberate control of Chi’karda the likes of which I’ve never seen in my life.”

Master George walked over to Tick, put a hand on his shoulder.

“You, sir, are a walking enigma. This changes everything.”

Homecoming

The next day and a half were a complete blur for Tick. Mothball broke the news of Annika's death to Master George and Rutger, neither of whom bothered trying to hide their emotions, weeping like children on each others' shoulders. Not much was said after that, except that Annika's courage in sacrificing her life to steal the Barrier Wand would never be forgotten. Tick hadn't known her at all, but he still felt sad she was gone.

As for how Tick had winked them away to safety, no one understood what had happened, least of all Master George. He kept saying that the amount of conviction Tick had channeled, the sheer *energy* of his desire to wink himself and the others back to Reality Prime should've killed him. It must've been such an unusual display of Chi'karda that the instruments back in the Triangle didn't know how to measure it or surely Rutger would've noticed an anomaly.

Eventually, everyone grew tired of so many questions without answers, and looked ahead to what came next.

Going home.

Master George said that even though Mistress Jane had kept her Chi'karda Drive, it was useless without the Wand casing. It would take her several months to build a new Barrier Wand capable of using its power. For now, she—and her newfound dark and twisted magic—were trapped within the Thirteenth Reality. The new Realitants' successful mission had bought them considerable time, time which Master George needed to repair his headquarters, plan for the future, and think about the potential meaning of Tick's unexplained ability.

As young as the Realitants were, with worried families, Master George thought it best that they return to their homes, explain their futures, and continue their studies—all until such time came that Master George needed them again.

And need them he would, he assured them over and over.

And so late that night, Tick, Sofia, Sato, and Paul stood in a circle by the roaring fire—Master George *loved* fires, even in the middle of the desert in summer—with Master George and his two assistants, Mothball and Rutger. Everyone was silent, the reality of saying good-bye a heavy weight on their hearts.

As for Tick, he felt like his *soul* hurt. Though he'd only known these

people a short time, the experiences they'd been through had solidified them as the very best friends he'd ever had. He felt excited to see his family, but dreaded the thought of going to bed tonight, alone in his room, not knowing how long it might be before he'd see any of the Realitants again. It took every ounce of will in his bones to keep from crying.

"Sato, my young friend," Master George said, finally breaking the somber silence. "I'd like to invite you to stay with us, to help us at the Triangle. These others have families to return to, but, er, well—I think you'd likely agree that joining us at headquarters may be in your best interest. Your, er, guardians will barely notice you're gone, I expect."

Tick looked at Sato, shocked. The quiet boy from Japan hadn't said much since their return from the Thirteenth Reality.

Sato looked up, trying to hide the relief on his face, but failing. "I will stay." He looked at Tick, then the others, as if he wanted desperately to say something. Instead, he folded his arms and looked away.

Tick's whole perception of Sato changed in that instant. *What mysteries are hidden inside that brain of his?*

"We'll be simply delighted to have your help," Master George said. "Now, then, it's almost time to wink everyone back to their homes. But first, I have something to give all of you." He reached into the folds of his suit and pulled out a handful of thin gold-link chains, a heavy pendant swinging from each one. "These will forever mark you as official and bonafide Realitants."

Tick stared at the shiny gold ornament as Master George placed the chain over his head like he'd just won an Olympic medal. Tick studied the object hanging on his chain, bringing it close to his eyes for a better look. It was a miniature replica of a Barrier Wand, dials and all, solid and heavy.

"Be sure and wear them under your shirts," Master George said as he stepped back in front of the group. "No need to go around advertising you're a member of the most important society in the world. Plenty of enemies about."

As Tick tucked the Wand pendant under his scarf and shirt, feeling the cold hardness warm up against his skin, Rutger began passing out small pieces of thick paper to each of the kids. "These are your official membership cards, so don't lose them."

Tick accepted his, a stiff brown card that simply said, "Atticus Higginbottom, Realitant Second Class."

"Whoa," Paul said. "No one will mess with us now. I'll just whip this puppy out and they'll run like scared dogs."

"Very funny, young man," Rutger said, folding his chubby arms. "You just be sure and hold onto your Wand pendant and that card—you've earned them both."

“Yes, indeed,” Master George said. “And now, we must really let you be on your way. Atticus, your name begins with an A, so let’s send you off first.”

Tick’s stomach leaped into his throat. “Um, okay.” He stepped forward.

“Wait a second,” Paul said. “We need a send-off to pump us up.” He held his hand out to the middle of the circle.

Tick joined him, then Sato, then Rutger, and Mothball. Master George chuckled and put his hand out, too. Rolling her eyes, Sofia finally did as well.

“Go Realitants!” Paul yelled. He groaned at everyone else’s half-hearted attempt. “You guys need more team spirit.”

“Please tell me we don’t have to do that every time,” Sofia muttered.

“Yeah,” Tick agreed. “I think I’m with Sofia on that.”

Paul looked devastated. “She’s corrupted you.”

Tick shrugged. “It is kind of corny.” He paused, grinning. “Dude.”

Master George cleared his throat. “Time to be off. Atticus, step up here, please.”

Tick did so, adjusting the tattered and sappy scarf that clung to his neck like a frightened ferret. Mothball began the good-byes.

“Best of luck, little sir,” she said, leaning down to give him a quick hug. “Get a little older and I’ll be bringin’ ya a nice tall girlfriend from the Fifth, I will. Better than a short fat one from the Eleventh, don’t ya think?” She winked and stepped back.

“See ya, big guy,” Rutger said, reaching up to pat Tick on the elbow. “Sorry about all the rock-throwing.”

Tick laughed. “No problem.”

“Later, dude,” Paul said next. “See ya on the e-mail.”

“Definitely.”

Tick turned to Sato, who reached out and shook Tick’s hand.

“Thank you,” Sato said. “Next time I will save *your* life.”

“There’s a good plan,” Tick replied with a smile. He turned to face Sofia.

She looked at him, her eyes revealing that she was trying to think of a smart-aleck remark. She finally gave up and pulled Tick into a hug, squeezing tightly. “E-mail me,” she said. “*Tonight.*”

Tick awkwardly patted her on the back. “Remember our bet—you have to come visit me in America. And I want some more free spaghetti sauce, too.”

“Count on it.” She pulled away, not bothering to hide her tears.

Tick turned to face Master George again, relieved the good-byes were over.

“Master Atticus, my dear friend,” the old man said, his ruddy face beaming with a smile. “Your family will be so proud of you, as well they should. Quite a puzzlement you’ve given us to figure out, I must say. Busy, busy we’ll be.”

Tick nodded, not knowing what to say.

“Very good, then.” Master George held up the Barrier Wand, having already set the controls. “Put your hand on the Wand. There we are.”

“Bye everybody,” Tick said, closing his eyes, hurting inside.

Master George had one final thing to say, though, whispering in Tick’s ear. “Atticus, never forget the inherent power of the Chi’karda. Never forget the power of your choices, for good or for ill. And most importantly, never forget your courage.”

Before Tick could reply, he heard a click.

He felt the now-familiar tingle.

Then came the sounds of birds and wind.

~

Edgar Higginbottom sat on his favorite chair next to the window, staring at the floor, wringing his hands together as he wondered for the millionth time what had happened to Tick. *He’s lucky*, Edgar kept telling himself. *All those times as a kid—something’s protecting him. He’ll be fine.*

But it had been almost four full days since the boy vanished, and the worry ate at Edgar’s heart like a hideous disease. Lorena was no better; they could barely look at each other without bursting into tears. Even Lisa was worried.

And yet Edgar knew it had been the right thing to do. Somehow, someway, he *knew*. Atticus Higginbottom was out saving the world, and when he was done, he’d come back home, ready for a new game of Football 3000. But when—

Edgar heard someone shouting outside. A kid’s voice. *Tick’s* voice.

He looked up, his heart swelling to dangerous sizes when he saw Tick running down the street toward the house. For a second, Edgar couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe, practically choking as he tried to yell for his wife. *It was him. It was really him!*

“Lorena!” Edgar finally managed to scream, squirming to get his big body out of the chair. “Lorena! Tick’s back! I *told* you he’d be back!” He found himself laughing, then crying, then laughing again as he ran for the front door.

Lorena thumped down the stairs, faster than he’d ever seen her move in his life. Kayla and Lisa bolted out of the kitchen, eyes wide in surprise.

“He’s really here?” Lorena asked, her hand on her heart as if she didn’t dare hope Edgar had been telling the truth.

“He’s back, he’s back!” Edgar yelled with delight as he ripped open the door and ran outside.

Tick ran into his dad’s arms, then, almost knocking Edgar down. They hugged each other, then parted to bring Lorena and the girls into the group. In

one big tangle of arms, the Higginbottom family hugged and laughed and jumped and generally made complete fools of themselves. The world had suddenly become a very bright and cheerful place to be.

Finally, Tick pulled away, looking at each of his family members in turn. “I’ve had a crazy couple of days.”

~

Later that night, well after dark, Tick stood in the front yard under a sky thick with black clouds, not a star or moon in sight, thinking.

He thought about everything that had happened to him, but his thoughts kept returning to the bizarre incidents of the letter reappearing in his *Journal of Curious Letters* after Kayla had burned it, and how he’d made the Barrier Wand work even though Mistress Jane had broken it. Somehow, the two events were linked, but Tick couldn’t begin to understand why or how. Did he have some kind of weird, freaky power? Or did Mistress Jane do something to the Realities, altering how the Chi’karda functioned?

Master George’ll figure it out, Tick thought, trying to ignore how much it scared him.

He turned to walk back inside when the ground around him brightened, the slightest hint of a shadow at his feet. To the east, the full moon appeared, shining through a brief break in the clouds.

As if it were a sign, Atticus Higginbottom, Realitant Second Class, pulled out the Barrier Wand pendant from beneath his shirt and squeezed it in his fist.

Epilogue

~

The Thwarted Meeting

Reginald Chu, the second best inventor and greatest businessman of all time, looked at his skinwatch again. He sat atop a park bench made from the new Plasticair material his company had created, growing more furious with every passing second. The person who'd asked to meet him here was *late*.

And no one was ever late for the founder, owner, and CEO of Chu Industries.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the odd note that had been mailed to him several weeks ago, without any kind of return address or postmark. He unfolded the wrinkly paper and read through the handwritten message once again.

Dear Mister Chu,

You don't know me, but we must meet very soon. I know you are aware of the Realities, but that you have never had much interest in them because the Fourth is so much more advanced than the others. But I have a proposition for you that I am certain you will accept. I know of your love for power.

As a measure of my sincerity, I will come to your Reality. Meet me in Industry Park by the Lone Oak at noon on the thirteenth of May.

Your future partner,

Mistress Jane

Reginald crumpled the note up into a ball, squeezing it in his fist. The audacity of this woman. Commanding him to meet her like he was some errand-running schoolboy—and then having the nerve to not even show up? Who called themselves *Mistress* anyway?

He looked at his skinwatch one last time, then stood up. The lady was obviously not coming.

As he walked back toward his building, Reginald threw the mysterious note into a roving Recycabot, angry about the time he'd wasted. There was much to be done, things he'd mapped out and set in motion long before he'd received a letter from today's no-show, Mistress Jane.

Reginald was a very busy man.

A Glossary of People, Places, and All Things Important

Alterant—Different versions of the same person who exist in different Realities. It is extremely dangerous for Alterants to meet each other.

Annika—A spy for the Realitants who spends many months slowly gaining Mistress Jane's trust.

Atticus Higginbottom—Also known as Tick, a thirteen-year-old resident of Deer Park, Washington. He is very smart and loves to play chess, and often suffers cruelty at the hands of bullies. He begins receiving very strange letters that lead him toward a dangerous destiny.

Barf Scarf—A red-and-black scarf that Tick wears at all times to hide the ugly birthmark on his neck.

Barrier Wand—The device used to wink people and things between Realities and between heavily concentrated places of Chi'karda within the *same* Reality. To transport humans, they must be in a place concentrated with Chi'karda (like a cemetery) and have a nanolocator that transmits their location to the Wand. It is useless without the Chi'karda Drive, which channels and magnifies the mysterious power.

Bermuda Triangle—For reasons unknown, this is the most concentrated area of Chi'karda in each Reality.

Billy "The Goat" Cooper—Tick's nemesis at Jackson Middle School.

Chi'karda—The mysterious force that controls quantum physics. It is the scientific embodiment of conviction and choice, which in reality rules the universe. Responsible for creating the different Realities.

Chi'karda Drive—The invention that revolutionized the universe, able to harness, magnify, and control Chi'karda. It has long been believed that travel between Realities is impossible without it.

Chu Industries—The company that practically rules the Fourth Reality. Known for countless inventions and technologies—some that are helpful and useful, others that are malicious in nature.

Command Center—Master George's headquarters in the Bermuda Triangle where Chi'karda levels are monitored and to where his many nanolocators report various types of information.

Edgar Higginbottom—Tick's father. Though overweight and not exactly handsome, he is instantly loved by anyone who meets him. A very light sleeper.

Fangen—The sickening abomination of a creature created by Mistress Jane, utilizing the twisted and mutated version of Chi’karda found in the Thirteenth Reality. Formed from a variety of no less than twelve different animals, the fangen are bred to kill and ask questions later. They can also fly.

Fragmented—When a Reality begins losing Chi’karda levels on a vast scale and can no longer maintain itself as a major alternate version of the world, it will eventually fragment and disintegrate into nothing.

Frazier Gunn—A loyal servant of Mistress Jane, though he hopes to replace her one day.

Frupey—Nickname for Fruppenschneiger, Sofia’s butler.

Gnat Rat—A malicious invention of Chu Industries from the Fourth Reality. Releases dozens of mechanical hornets that are programmed to attack a certain individual based on a nanolocator, DNA, or blood type.

Grand Canyon—A satellite location of the Realitants. Second only to the Bermuda Triangle in Chi’karda levels.

Hans Schtiggenschlubberheimer—The man who started the Scientific Revolution in the Fourth Reality in the early nineteen hundreds. In a matter of decades, he helped catapult the Fourth far beyond the other Realities in terms of technology.

Kayla Higginbottom—Tick’s four-year-old sister. Loves to burn things and have tea parties.

Kyoopty—Nickname used by the Realitants for quantum physics.

Lisa Higginbottom—Tick’s fifteen-year-old sister. Horrible on the piano.

Lorena Higginbottom—Tick’s mother. Loves to cook, and could sleep through a raging tornado.

Mabel Ruth Gertrude Higginbottom Fredrickson—Edgar’s aunt, long since widowed, who lives in Alaska. Hasn’t seen any of her family members in years.

Master George—The current leader of the Realitants. Overwhelmed by the betrayal of Mistress Jane, he sets out to strengthen his forces, sending out a series of tests and riddles to help him find worthy candidates. Loves his cat, Muffintops.

Mistress Jane—A former Realitant and the biggest traitor the world has ever known. When she discovered the Thirteenth Reality and its twisted, mutated version of Chi’karda, she quickly realized the power she could have for herself and the potential for ruling the universe. Her plans are only beginning. Loves the color yellow and is bald.

Mothball—A Realitant from the Fifth Reality, she is fiercely loyal to Master George. Regrets her name, which was given to her without much forethought by her father. Realizes she fared better than her twin sister, Toejam.

Ms. Sears—Tick’s favorite librarian. Has funny hair that looks like a cleaning pad.

Muffintops—Master George’s cat. Can’t speak English, but loves milk.

Multiverse—A term used by Reality Prime scientists to explain the theory that quantum physics has created multiple versions of the universe.

Nanolocator—A microscopic electronic device that can crawl into a person’s skin and forever provide information on their whereabouts and Chi’karda levels, among other information.

Nitwit—The unfortunately named servant child of Mistress Jane. Like those before her, Nitwit has been given the ability to fly, based on a manipulation of Chi’karda. Replaced Jane’s prior child servant, Nincompoop.

Norbert Johnson—A post office worker in Macadamia, Alaska. Is terrified of Mistress Jane based on only one encounter.

Paul Rogers—A thirteen-year-old Realitant recruit from Florida. Loves surfing and playing the piano.

Pick—Master George’s nickname for a major decision in which a person’s Chi’karda levels spike considerably. Some Picks have been known to create or destroy entire Realities.

Quantum Physics—The science that studies the physical world of the extremely small. Most scholars are baffled by its properties and at a loss to explain them. Theories abound. Only a few know the truth: that a completely different power rules this realm, which in turn rules the universe: Chi’karda.

Realitants—An organization sworn to discover and charter all known Realities. Founded in the 1970s by a group of scientists from the Fourth Reality, the early Realitants used Barrier Wands to recruit other quantum physicists from other Realities. Their focus changes when one of their best betrays them and they decide they must seek out not only people of science, but those who have the courage, intelligence, and strength—along with the innocence of youth—to fight in the coming months and years.

Realities—A separate and complete version of the world, of which there may be an infinite number. The most stable and strongest reality is called Reality Prime. So far, twelve major branches of Reality Prime have been discovered. Realities are created and destroyed by enormous fluctuations in Chi’karda levels.

Fourth—Much more technologically advanced than the other Realities, due to the remarkable vision and work of Hans Schtiggenschlubberheimer.

Fifth—Quirks in evolution led to a very tall human race.

Eighth—The world is covered in water due to much higher temperatures, caused by a star fusion anomaly triggered in another galaxy by an alien race.

Eleventh—Quirks in evolution and diet led to a short and robust human

race.

Thirteenth—A mutated and very powerful version of Chi’karda exists here. It is a world full of magic and darkness.

Reginald Chu—Tick’s science teacher who shares the same name as the person in the Fourth Reality who founded Chu Industries and turned it into a worldwide empire. They may be Alterants of each other.

Rutger—A Realitant from the Eleventh Reality, he is best friends with Mothball. Works as Master George’s right-hand man in the Command Center. Loves to throw rocks at Tick.

Sato—A fourteen-year-old Realitant recruit from Japan. He has a dark secret that makes him very reluctant to ever trust another Realitant.

Shockpulse—An injection of highly concentrated electromagnetic nanobots that seek out and destroy the tiny components of a nanolocator, rendering it useless.

Snooper Bug—A hideous crossbreed of birds and insects created by the mutated power of the Chi’karda in the Thirteenth Reality. Can detect any known weapon or poison and can kill with one quick strike of its needle-nosed beak. Pet of Mistress Jane.

Sofia Pacini—A twelve-year-old Realitant recruit from Italy. From an extremely wealthy family, she is tougher than nails and has no problem displaying it.

Sound Slicer—A small device that shoots out a heavily concentrated force of sound waves, almost too low for the human ear to register but powerful enough to knock something senseless if caught in its direct path.

Tick—Nickname for Atticus Higginbottom.

Tingle Wraith—A collection of microscopic creatures from the Second Reality, called spilphens, that can form together into a cloud while rubbing against each other to make a horrible sound called the Death Siren. After thirty seconds, this sound does unpleasant things to a human, but has never been known to actually kill one. Chu Industries has developed a way to train and program the Wraiths to form into the shape of a creepy old man’s face (for fright effect) and appear to a certain individual based on a nanolocator, DNA, or blood type.

Windbike—An invention of Chu Industries, this vehicle is a motorcycle that can fly, consuming hydrogen directly out of the air for its fuel. Based on an extremely complex gravity-manipulation theorem first proposed by Reginald Chu.

Winking—The act of traveling between or within Realities by use of a Barrier Wand. Causes a slight tingle to a person’s shoulders and back.

Discussion Questions

1. Tick meets many strange people while solving the Twelve Clues, like Mothball, the tall and lanky woman with an unfortunate name, and Rutger, the short fat man from the Eleventh Reality. At first, Tick is scared of them both but soon learns to like and trust them. What lessons can we learn from that?

2. After his first fright with the Gnat Rat, Tick is tempted to burn the first letter from Master George. After much deliberation, he makes the choice to continue on, knowing that some important cause must exist behind it all. What does this teach us about courage and sacrifice? Would you have burned the letter?

3. When Tick and his dad travel to Alaska to investigate the postmark of the first letter, they find that Norbert Johnson has retreated to his home, scared to death that Mistress Jane will return to seek vengeance. They help him confront his fear and return to society and to the job he loves. How do you think that applies to your own life?

4. Tick wears a scarf to hide the ugly red birthmark on his neck. Do you think that's necessary? Is there something about yourself that you hide from others? Should you?

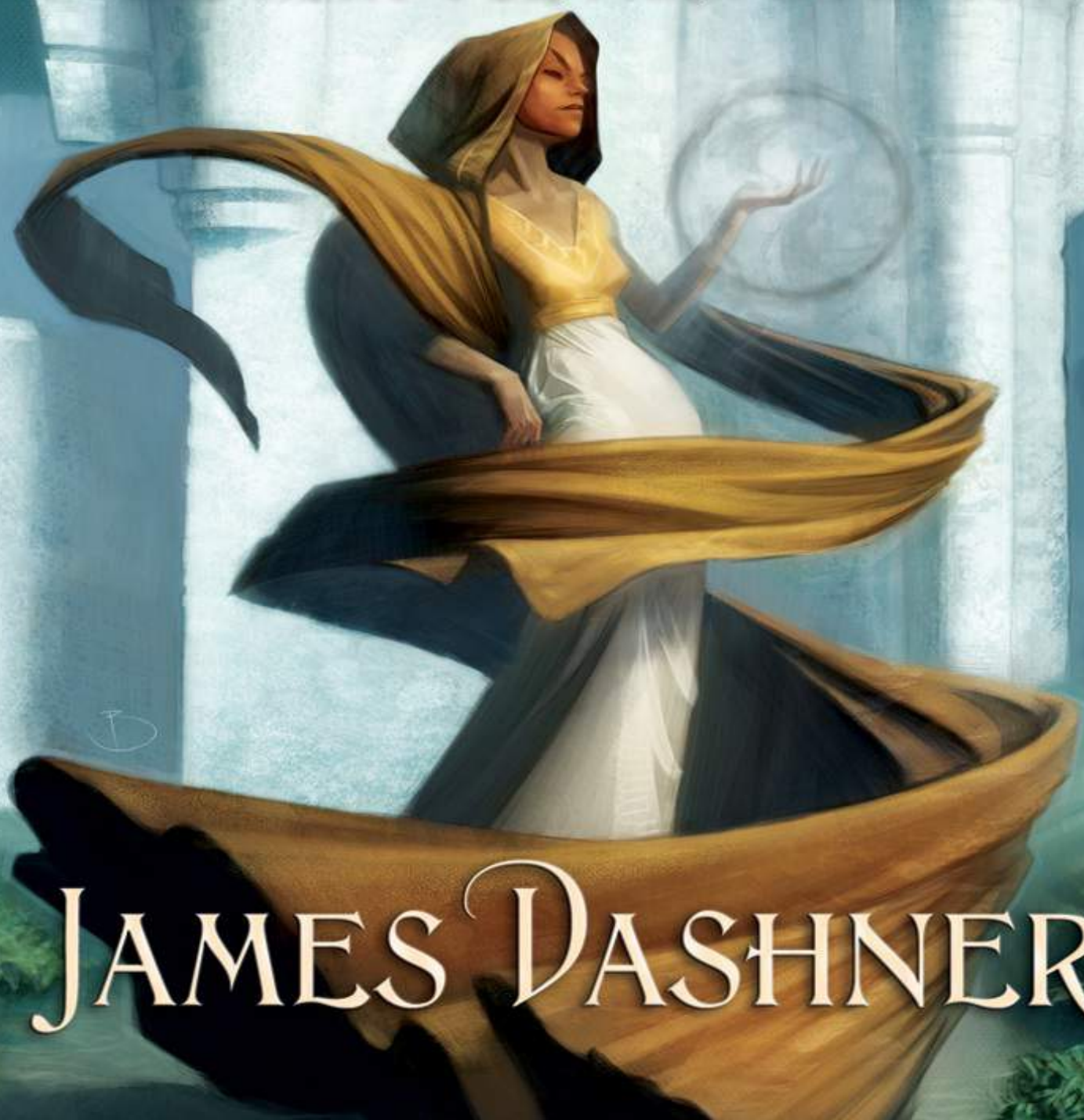
5. We learn in the story that every choice a person makes can lead to drastic changes in other Realities. How can we relate that to the choices in our own lives, and to the enormous consequences we may experience?

6. Tick debates whether or not he should tell his parents about the letters and the clues, but decides to do so in the end. Why do you think it's important to trust our parents and confide in them, even about the really hard things?

7. We find out in the end that it was actually Master George who sent the many frightening dangers that Tick encountered while investigating the clues. Master George tells Tick that he did so to test his courage and help him grow into the kind of person capable of working as a Realitant. How can this perspective help you face the many trials and tough times thrown at you in your own life?

THE 13TH REALITY

THE HUNT FOR DARK INFINITY



JAMES DASHNER

THE 13TH REALITY

BOOK 2
THE HUNT FOR DARK INFINITY

JAMES DASHNER

ILLUSTRATED BY
BRYAN BEUS



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Summary: After being kidnapped by Mr. Chu, Atticus "Tick" Higginbottom and his friends Paul and Sofia must survive a series of tests in several different Realities.

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This book is dedicated to my siblings:

Michael, Lisa, David, Paul, and Sarah

Thanks for making life fun and adventurous.

I just wish you had shared more of the Dashner good-looking genes. I love you guys.

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The Illness

The boy stared at his world gone mad.

The wintry, white face of the mountain housing the End of the Road Insane Asylum towered behind him, its forever-frozen peak lost in the gray clouds blanketing the sky. Before him, the boy saw the last person of his village succumb to the claws of insanity.

The man was filthy, barely clothed, scraped from head to toe. He thrashed about in the muddy grass of what used to be the village commons, clutching at things above him that were not there. The man's eyes flared, wide and white, as if he saw ghosts swarming in for the haunt. He screamed now and then, a raw rasp that revealed the condition of his ruined throat. Then, spurred by something unseen, the man got up and sprinted away, stumbling and getting back up again, running wildly, arms flailing.

The boy finally tore his eyes away, tears streaming as he looked back toward the icy mountain. A lot of the crazies were already there, filling the asylum to capacity—prospective inmates had been turned away for a week now, left to wander the streets and fight others who were as mad as they were.

The boy had not eaten in two days. He'd not slept in three, at least not peacefully. He'd stopped grieving for his parents and brother and started worrying about how to survive, how to live. He tried not to think—

You are mine, now.

The boy jumped, looking around for the source of the voice. Someone had spoken to him, as clear a sound as he'd ever heard. But no one was there.

There's no need to be alarmed. The Darkin Project will be fully functional soon. Until then, survive. This is an automatic recording. Good-bye for now.

The boy spun in a tight circle, searching his surroundings. He saw only the burnt ruins of his village—weeds, dust, trash. A rat skittered across the ruined road. Someone was screaming, but it was very far away.

The boy was alone.

The voice was in his head.

It had begun.

Part 1

The Unwanted Wink

The Two Faces of Reginald Chu

Mr. Chu hated his first name. It was evil.

Crazy, perhaps, for an adult to think such a thing—especially a science teacher—but as he walked down the dark, deserted street, he felt the truth of it like a forty-pound weight in his gut. He'd felt it since childhood—an odd uneasiness every time someone called his name. A black pit in his belly, like rotting food that wouldn't digest.

“Mr. Chu!”

The sharp ring of the woman's voice slicing through the air startled him out of his thoughts. His breath froze somewhere inside his lungs, sticking to the surface, making him cough until he could breathe again. He looked up, relieved to see it was only Mrs. Tennison poking her frilly head out a high window, no doubt spying on her neighbors. Her hair was pulled into dozens of tight curlers, her face covered in a disgusting paste that looked like green frosting.

Mr. Chu drew another deep, calming breath, embarrassed he'd been jolted so easily. “Hi, Mrs. Tennison,” he called up to her. “Nice night, huh?”

“Yeah,” she said in an unsure voice, as if suspecting him of trouble. “Why, uh, why are you out so late? And so far away from your house? Maybe you'd like to, uh, come up for a cup of tea?” She did something with her face that Mr. Chu suspected was supposed to be a tempting smile, but looked more like a demented clown with bad gas.

Mr. Chu shuddered. He'd rather share a cup of oil sludge with Jack the Ripper than spend one minute in Mrs. Tennison's home, listening to her incessant jabbering about town gossip. “Oh, better not—just walking off some stress,” he finally said. “Enjoying the night air.” He turned to walk away, glad to have his back to her.

“Well, be careful!” she yelled after him. “Been reports of thugs in the town square, mobbin' and stealin' and such.”

“Don't worry,” he replied without looking back. “I'll keep an eye out.”

He quickened his step, turned a corner, and relaxed into a nice and easy gait. His thoughts settled back to the strange fear he had of his own first name. The name he avoided whenever possible. The reason he always introduced himself as “Mr. Chu” to everyone he met.

Having taught science at Jackson Middle School in Deer Park, Washington, for more than twenty years, he'd hardly ever been called anything *but* Mr. Chu. Single and childless, his parents long dead, and

separated from his brothers and sisters by thousands of miles, he had no one to call him anything more intimate than those two lonely, icy words. Even the other teachers mostly hailed him by his formal title, as if they dared not befriend him. As if they were afraid of him.

But it was better than the alternative. Better than hearing the word he despised.

Reginald.

Wiping sweat from his brow, he thought back to an incident several months earlier when a fellow teacher had uttered aloud the rarely heard *Reginald* when poking her head into his classroom for a question. A student had stayed after school that day, and the look that had swept over the boy's face upon hearing Mr. Chu's first name had been a haunted, disturbed expression, as if the kid thought Mr. Chu stole children from their beds and sold them to slave traders.

The look had hurt Mr. Chu. Deeply. That cowering wince of fear had solidified what he had considered until then to be an irrational whim—the childish, lingering superstition that his name was indeed evil. The knowledge had always been there, hidden within him like a dormant seed, waiting only for a spark of life.

The student had been Atticus “Tick” Higginbottom, his favorite in two decades of teaching. The boy had unbelievable smarts, a keen understanding of the workings of the world, a maturity far beyond his almost fourteen years. Mr. Chu felt an uncanny connection to Tick—an excitement to tutor him and guide him to bigger and better things in the fascinating fields of science. But the look on that fateful day had crushed Mr. Chu's heart, tipping him over a precipice onto a steep and slippery slope of depression and self-loathing.

It made no sense for a man grounded in the hard science of his profession to be so profoundly affected by such a simple event. It was an elusive thing, hard to reconcile with the immovable theorems and hypotheses that orbited his mind like rigid satellites. A name, a word, a look, an expression. Simple things, yet somehow life-changing.

Now, as he walked home in the darkness of night, the new school year only a few days away, the air around him mirrored his deepest feelings and unsettling thoughts. Instead of cooling off, it seemed to get hotter. The suffocating heat stilted his breathing despite the sun having gone to bed hours earlier. Since Mrs. Tennison's intrusion, neither people nor breeze had stirred in the late hour. The muted thumps of his tennis shoes were the only sound accompanying him on this now habitual midnight walk, when sleep eluded him. He turned onto the small lane leading to the town cemetery—a shortcut to his home—a creepy but somehow exhilarating path.

It had been a long summer—weeks of huddling under the burning lamp in

his study, scouring the pages of every science magazine and journal to which he could possibly subscribe. He'd channeled his growing self-pity into an unprecedented thirst for knowledge, his brain soaking it up like a monstrous, alien sponge. Oh, how he'd enjoyed every single minute of his obsessive study binge. It kept him sane, helped him—

Mr. Chu faltered, almost stumbled, when he realized a man stood just outside the stone archway of the cemetery, arms folded across his chest, silhouetted against the pale light of a streetlamp in the distance. He seemed to have appeared from nowhere, as Mr. Chu had detected no movement prior to noticing the stranger. Like a black cardboard cutout, the figure didn't move, staring with unseen eyes, sending a wave of prickly goose bumps down Mr. Chu's arms.

He recovered his wits and continued walking, refusing to show fear. Why was he so jumpy tonight? He had no reason to think this man was a thug, despite Mrs. Tennison's absurd warning. Even if the still figure, standing there like a statue, was a bad guy, it would do no good to act afraid. All the same, Mr. Chu slyly changed his course to cross the lane, knowing the small, wooded area between here and the town square would provide cover if he needed to run and hide.

Quit being ridiculous, he chided himself. However, he kept the mysterious shadow of a man in the corner of his vision.

Mr. Chu had just reached the gravel-strewn side of the road when his late-night visitor spoke—a slippery, soft-spoken whisper that nevertheless carried like clanging cowbells through the deep silence of the night.

“Where do you think *you're* going?”

Bitter mockery filled the voice, and Mr. Chu stopped walking, falling through the thin ice of apprehension straight into an abyss of outright terror, something he had never truly felt before. It turned his stomach, squeezed it, sending sour, rotten juices through his body; he wanted to bend over and throw up.

Another man stepped out of the woods to his right. At the same moment, a finger tapped him from behind on his right shoulder. Shrieking, Mr. Chu spun around, his fear igniting into panic.

This time, he saw a face—a shadowed mug of hard angles, rigid with anger. Mr. Chu saw a flicker of movement, then a flash of blue light. An explosion of heat and electricity came from everywhere at once, knocking him to the ground in a twitching heap. He cried out as pain lanced through his body, tendrils of lightning coursing along his skin. With a whimper, he looked up and saw the person holding out a long device which still crackled with static electricity.

“Wow, you look just like him,” the nameless face said.

Reginald Chu, founder and CEO of Chu Industries, stood within his massive laboratory, studying the latest test results from the ten-story-tall Darkin Project as he awaited word on the abduction of his Alterant from Reality Prime. It amused him to know the science teacher would be brought to the same building in which he himself stood—a dangerous prospect at best, certain death at worst. Mixing with alternate versions of yourself from other Realities was like playing dentist with a cobra.

Which is why his employees had been given strict instructions to never bring the *other* Reginald Chu within five hundred feet of the *real* Reginald Chu (the one who mattered most in the universe anyway). They'd lock the look-alike away in a maximum-security cell deep in the lower chambers of the artificial mountain of glass that was Chu Industries until they needed the captive to serve his dual purpose in being kidnapped.

Dual purpose. Reginald took a deep breath, loving the smells of electronics and burnt oil that assaulted his senses. He reflected on the plan he'd set into place once the information had poured in from his network of spies in the other Realities. They brought news of intriguing developments with massive potential consequences—especially the bit about the boy named Atticus Higginbottom.

If Reginald was not the most supreme example of rational intelligence ever embodied in a human being—and he most certainly *was*—he would have doubted the truth of what he'd heard and had verified by countless sources. It seemed impossible on the face of it—something from a storybook told to dirty urchins in an orphanage before they went to bed. Tales of magic and power, of an unspeakable ability in the manipulation of the most central force in the universe: Chi'karda. A human Barrier Wand, perhaps.

But Reginald knew the mystery could be explained, all within the complex but perfectly understood realm of science. Still, the idea thrilled him. The boy had no idea what was at stake—he had something Reginald Chu wanted, and nothing in the world could be more dangerous than that.

Reginald walked over to the airlift which would ascend along the surface of the tall project device. He allowed his retina to be scanned, then stepped onto the small metal square of the hovervator. He pressed the button for the uppermost level. As the low whine of the lift kicked in, pushing him toward the false sky of the ridiculously large chamber, he heard the slightest beep from the nanophone nestled deep within the skin of his ear.

“Yes?” he said in a sharp clip, annoyed at being disturbed even though he'd *told* them to do so as soon as they returned. The microscopic particles of the device he'd invented took care of all communication needs with no effort on his part.

“We have him,” the soft voice of Benson replied, echoing in Reginald’s mind as though from a long-dead spirit. Benson had been the lead on the mission to Reality Prime.

“Good. Is he harmed? Did you raid his house, gather his . . . *things*?” The airlift came to a stop with a soft bump; Reginald stepped onto the metal-grid catwalk encircling his grandest scientific experiment to date. From here, all he could see was the shiny golden surface of the enormous cylinder, dozens of feet wide, reflecting back a distorted image of his face that made him look monstrous.

“Everything went exactly as planned,” Benson said. “No blips.”

Reginald stabbed a finger in the air even though he knew Benson couldn’t see him. “Don’t you dare bring that sorry excuse for a Chu near me—not even close. There’s no guarantee who’d flip into the Nonex. I want him locked away—”

“Done,” Benson barked.

Reginald frowned at his underling’s tone and interruption. He took note to watch Benson closely in case his lapse in judgment developed into something more akin to insubordination or treachery.

“Bring his belongings to me and ready him for the Darkin injection.”

“Yes, sir. Right away, sir.” Reginald’s nanophone registered a faint quiver in Benson’s voice.

Ah-ha, Reginald thought. Benson had realized his mistake and was trying to make up for it with exaggerated respect. *Stupid man*.

“As soon as we inject him,” Reginald said, “we can begin phase two. You’ve checked and rechecked that the others are still together?”

“Yes, sir. All three of them, together for another two days. School starts after the weekend.”

“You’re *sure*?” Reginald didn’t want to waste any more time away from his project than he must.

“Seen them with my own eyes,” Benson said, the slightest hint of condescension in his voice. “They’ll have no reason to suspect anything. Your plan is flawless.”

Reginald laughed, a curt chortle that ended abruptly. “You always know what to say, Benson. A diplomat of diplomats—though one not afraid to squeeze a man’s throat until he sputters his last cough. A perfect combination.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Call me when you’re ready.” Reginald blinked hard, the preprogrammed signal to end his call with the synthesized sound of an old-fashioned phone slamming into its cradle.

Clasping his hands behind his back, Reginald continued pacing around the wide arc of the Darkin Project, his carnival-mirror reflection bobbing up and down in the polished, cold metal. He loved doing this, loved the feeling he got when the words that lay imprinted in large, black letters appeared on the other side. He slowed for dramatic effect, running his left hand lightly across the indentation of the first letter. A few more steps and he stopped, turning slowly toward the cylinder to look at the two words for the thousandth time—the thrill of it never ceased to amaze him.

Two words, spanning the length of his outstretched arms. Two words, black on gold. Two words that would change the Realities forever.

Dark Infinity.



Spaghetti

“Dude, that stuff smells like feet.”

Tick Higginbottom stifled a laugh, knowing his friend Paul’s brave statement would bring down the wrath of Sofia Pacini, who was hard at work kneading a big ball of dough in the Higginbottoms’ kitchen. Tick loved watching the two of them go at each other. He adjusted the red-and-black scarf around his neck, loosening it to let more air in, and settled back to enjoy the show.

“What?” Sofia said, using her pinky to push a strand of black hair behind her ear—the rest of her fingers were covered with flour and yellow goop. “*What* smells like feet?”

Paul pointed at the kitchen counter, where a mass of raw pasta dough rested like a bulbous alien growth. “*That*—the famous Pacini spaghetti recipe. If I wasn’t helping you make it, I’d swear my Uncle Bobby had just walked in with his shoes off.” He looked over at Tick and squinted his eyes in disgust, waving his hand in front of his nose. “That guy’s feet sweat like you wouldn’t believe—they smell like boiled cabbage.”

Sofia turned toward Paul and grabbed his shirt with both hands, obviously not concerned about how dirty they were. “One more word, Rogers. One more, and I’ll shove this dough down your throat. You’d probably choke and save Master George the trouble of firing your skinny Realitant hide. Plus, it’s the feta cheese that stinks, not the dough.”

“Whatever it is, I’ll eat it,” Paul said. “Just hurry—I’m starving.”

Sofia let go and turned back to her work. “You Americans—all you want is fast food. We still have to make the sauce while the pasta dries.”

“Tick,” Paul groaned, “can’t we just make some hot dogs?”

“Grab some chips out of the pantry,” Tick said, pointing. “I’m waiting for the world-famous Pacini spaghetti.”

More than six months ago, Sofia had won a bet to visit Tick. Since her family had more money than most movie stars, she not only paid for her trip from Italy, but she also paid for Paul to come from Florida at the same time. Tick had looked forward to the visit all summer, thinking every day about his friends and their crazy experience in the Thirteenth Reality where they’d all been lucky to escape alive. Although this was only the second time the three of them had been together, they were already friends for life, not to mention members of a very important group—the Realitants.

“All right,” Sofia said. “Time to get busy. Help me spin out the strands.”

She grabbed a small wad of dough and showed them how to shape it into a long, slender rope. Like soldiers following orders, Tick and Paul got to work while Sofia started on the sauce, chopping ingredients and pouring one thing after another into a huge metal pot.

“So is Master George going to call us or what?” Paul said. After stealing Mistress Jane’s Barrier Wand, they’d been assured from their leader that it wouldn’t be long before the Realitants would gather again.

“It’s been almost three stinkin’ months,” Tick replied. “I check the mailbox every day.”

Sofia snorted and shook her head. “He can track people all over the world using nanolocators, but he still sends messages in crumpled old envelopes.” She measured a teaspoon of something orange and dropped it in the pot. “You’d think the old man could figure out how to use e-mail.”

“Chill, Miss Italy,” Paul said, holding up a long strand of dough and swinging it back and forth, grinning like it was the grandest form of entertainment in the world. “It’s so he can’t be tracked down by all the bad guys. Don’t you ever watch TV?”

Tick spoke up before Sofia could reply—he was hungry and didn’t want any more delays from his friends’ bickering. “I just hope he’s figured out how we winked out of the Thirteenth with a broken Barrier Wand.”

“*How?*” Paul asked. “I’ll tell you how. You’re a regular Houdini—all you need is a cape and one of those funky black hats.”

“And a wand,” Sofia said as she began stirring her cauldron of blood-red sauce.

“He *had* a wand,” Paul said. “It was just broken.”

Tick’s spirits dampened a bit, his heart heavy at remembering the terror of that moment when the Barrier Wand hadn’t worked, when he’d pushed the button over and over again as hordes of screaming, sharp-toothed fangen rushed at them. Any reminder that such monsters existed in the world—or worlds—was enough to make a spaghetti feast not quite as appealing.

“He made it work somehow,” Sofia said, nodding at Tick as she stirred. “Magic Boy himself.”

Tick did his best to smile, but it didn’t last.

Two hours later, the homemade meal passed Sofia’s inspection—barely. She kept insisting the sauce needed to simmer the rest of the day to taste perfect, but finally gave in to the impatient hunger groans of Paul and Tick. *It was worth every minute*, Tick thought as he shoveled in the food, not caring that he’d already spilled sauce on his scarf once and his shirt twice. He felt much better about things now that he wasn’t starving.

“I’m not gonna lie to ya,” Paul said through a huge bite, a vampire-like drip of red sauce streaked on his chin. “This is the best thing I’ve eaten in my entire life.”

Sofia sat back in her chair, pressing a hand to her heart. “Did you, Paul Rogers from Florida—King Smarty Pants himself—just say something nice to me?”

“Yes, ma’am, I did. And I meant every word of it. Dee-lish.”

“It’s really good,” Tick chimed in. “I’ll never doubt you again about your family’s claim to fame.”

Several moments passed, everyone too busy eating to talk. Sofia slurped her spaghetti, sounding like a renegade octopus trying to climb a slippery metal pole. Tick almost made a joke, but didn’t want to waste any breath when there were still noodles on his plate.

Paul wiped a big swath of sauce from his plate with a piece of garlic bread and shoved the whole thing in his mouth. “Man,” he mumbled as he chewed, “I can’t wait to visit more Realities so I can check out the ladies.”

Tick almost choked on a laugh. “Yeah, right. You’d be lucky to get a date with Rutger’s little sister.” Tick’s friend Rutger was an incredibly short and fat man from the Eleventh Reality. And full of pranks.

Paul shrugged. “As long as she’s not quite so . . . bowling-ballish, I’m cool with that. Paul ain’t picky.”

“Good thing, too,” Sofia said. “No girl I know would give you a second glance.”

“Oh, yeah? And why’s that?”

Sofia put down her fork and looked him square in the eyes, her face set in matter-of-fact stone. “Your ears are crooked.”

“Excuse me?”

“Your. Ears. Are. Crooked.” Sofia emphasized each word as if Paul spoke a foreign language, then folded her arms and raised her eyebrows.

“My ears are crooked,” Paul repeated, deadpan.

“Yes.”

“My ears are *not* crooked.”

“Yes, they are.”

“No, they’re not.”

“Crooked.”

Paul reached up and felt both of his ears, rubbing them between his thumbs and forefingers. “What does that even mean? How could they be crooked?”

Sofia pointed at Paul’s face. “Your left ear is almost half an inch lower than your right one. It looks ridiculous.”

“No way.” Paul looked to Tick for help. “No way.”

Tick leaned forward, studying Paul's face. "Sorry, big guy. Crooked as bad lumber."

"Where's a mirror?" Paul half-yelled, standing up and running for the bathroom. A few seconds later, his shriek echoed down the hall: "Tick! My ears are crooked!"

Tick and Sofia looked at each other and burst out laughing.

A dejected Paul came slouching down the hall; he pulled back his chair and collapsed onto the table. Then he held up a finger, like he had a brilliant idea. "Fine, but I have beautiful toenails—here, let me show you—"

"No!" Sofia and Tick shouted together.

Thankfully, the low rumble of the garage door opening saved the day. Tick's family was home.

"Well, if it's not my three favorite heroes in the world," Tick's dad said as he stumbled through the door, both arms full of packages and bags—new school clothes, by the looks of it. "How'd the spaghetti experiment go? Smells great." Tick knew what his dad was really thinking: *Give me some. Now!* The guy loved to eat, and his big belly showed it.

"The way these boys ate," Sofia said, "I'd say it went pretty well."

Paul moaned with pleasure, rubbing his belly. "Yes, sir, Mr. Higginbottom. The chef is a tyrant, but she can cook like you wouldn't believe."

"Best I've ever had," Tick agreed, just as his mom entered from the garage. "Oh, sorry, Mom. Yours is good too."

"It's okay, Atticus," Mom said as she set a couple of bags down on the counter. "I'd hope a young woman from a family well-known for their spaghetti would be able to beat mine any day."

Dad shook his head. "I don't know. You sure do know how to add spices to that Ragu sauce."

"Very funny," Mom replied.

Newly driving Lisa and newly turned five-year-old Kayla came through next, both holding bags of their own.

"Whoa, Mom," Tick said. "How much stuff did you buy?"

"Enough to keep three kids clothed for a year." She pointed a finger at Tick. "No growing until next summer. That's an order."

"Did you kill anyone driving to the mall, sis?" Tick asked.

Lisa gave him a mock evil stare. "Just one old lady—and I hit her on purpose."

"Wow," Paul said. "Sounds like—"

A sudden *crack* from upstairs interrupted him; a booming sound of

splitting, shattering wood shook the entire house. A plate fell from the counter and broke on the floor. Kayla shrieked and ran to her mom.

“What the—?” Dad said, already on the move out of the kitchen and down the hall, everyone following behind him. As his dad bounded up the stairs as quickly as he could move his big body, Tick anxiously looked around him to see what had caused the commotion.

Through a swirling cloud of dust and debris, Tick could see a large, silvery metal tube with a sharp, tapered end jutting from the wall outside Tick’s room, splinters of ripped wood holding it in place. It looked as if it had been shot from a cannon, a dud bomb lodged in the drywall.

“What on *earth*?” Mom said in a shaky voice, putting a hand on her husband’s arm.

Dad had no answer; Tick hurried past him to his bedroom door and opened it, expecting to see a disaster area—broken windows, a gaping hole in the side of the house, something. But his breath caught in his throat when he saw no damage at all—not a crack or tear in the ceiling, the windows, or the walls. His room was in perfect shape. The only thing out of place was the other end of the metal tube which stuck out of the wall to his left. It also had a tapered end.

Tick poked his head back into the hallway, examined the ceiling. No damage there, either. Everyone looked as perplexed as he felt.

Dad leaned forward and studied the strange object. “Where’d that thing come from? And how in the *world* did it get stuck in our wall?”

Something Odd Is Happening

Tick stepped forward; everyone else seemed frozen to the floor in amazement by the sudden and violent appearance of the strange metal tube. Dad stood there and shook his head, muttering under his breath.

Tick reached up, his hand slowing as he approached the sharp end of the cylinder sticking out into the hall.

His mom yelped. “Careful! Maybe we shouldn’t touch it.”

“It’s fine, Mom,” Tick replied. “There’s gotta be some reason it was sent here.”

“Yeah,” Paul said, “like, maybe to kill the state of Washington once you trigger its thermonuclear reactor inside.”

Ignoring Paul, Tick tested the side of the object with a quick tap to see if the metal was hot. Feeling only hard coolness, he wrapped his hand around the tube and yanked as hard as he could. With a high-pitched groaning squeal, it gave way and slipped out of the splintered hole. Finding it to be quite light, Tick bounced the three-foot-long cylinder in both hands as he turned to show it to everyone else.

“But what is it?” Sofia asked.

“Here, son,” Dad said, sticking his chest out as if to show he was the brave one who should examine the cylinder. “Let me check it out in case it explodes or something.”

“You’re so brave, sweetie,” Mom said, rubbing her husband’s shoulder with affection.

“Yeah,” he mumbled back. “A regular Iron Man.”

Tick handed the tube to his dad, who took it, turning it this way and that in front of his face, examining it with squinted eyes. He peered down its length as if he were aiming a sniper’s rifle.

“Having inspected this object fully,” Dad finally said, “I hereby declare it to be nothing but a solid metal rod.”

Tick cleared his throat, having just noticed something as his dad tilted the tube just right. “Well, um, there *is* a seam circling the middle.”

“Huh?” Dad lifted the thing until it was an inch from his eyeballs, then squinted again. “Oh. Yeah. You’re right.” With both hands, he gripped the ends of the rod, right before they tapered to sharp points, and pulled in opposite directions.

With a metallic scrape, the object split into two pieces. As soon as it did, a smaller tube fell to the floor, a flash of white that bounced once, rolled, then

came to a stop by Sofia's feet.

Sofia snapped it up and quickly unrolled the piece of paper. Her eyes quickly scanned the contents, then she looked up with a wide grin on her face.

"It's a message. From Master George."

They went back downstairs, the group huddled around Sofia as she sat in a chair at the kitchen table. Tick wiggled his way to be closest to her, looking down at the typed message as Sofia read it aloud.

Dear Fellow Realitants,

I hope this day finds you all warm and happy. If so, enjoy it. Dark times are upon us, and I fear we must gather as soon as possible.

Something odd is happening within the Realities. Something unnatural, indeed. Sinister forces are about, and I have my suspicions as to the source. And no, it is not Mistress Jane. I shan't write about it any further; you will be briefed during our meeting.

On the twenty-second of August, please report to the nearest cemetery at your earliest convenience, whereupon I will wink you to headquarters straightaway, based upon your nanolocator reading.

Now I really must be going, as poor Rutger appears to have hung his malodorous socks in front of the cooler vent, creating quite a smell, I assure you. Wish me luck in finding a can of powerful air freshener.

Most sincerely, Master George

P.S. Muffintops sends her warmest regards.

P.P.S. Please attach the Spinner to a blank wall and observe carefully to learn about entropy and fragmentation.

"Spinner?" Paul asked. "What's he talking about?"

"The twenty-second? That's only two days away," Tick's mom whispered, her voice not hiding the sudden dismay at the possibility of her son running off again.

Tick's initial excitement at hearing from Master George quickly faded into a sickly pang in his gut. He had dreaded this moment in many ways, knowing he'd be summoned again, leaving his poor mom to worry about him. Even though she'd been convinced of the truth about the Realities, Tick knew that when the day actually came for him to leave again, she'd throw a fit.

Like any good mother.

“Mom . . .” Tick said, but no other words filled his mouth.

His dad reached over and squeezed Tick’s shoulder, then shook his head ever so slightly when they made eye contact.

“Honey,” Dad said, “let’s go for a drive and talk a bit. Lisa, Kayla, you come with us—we’ll get some ice cream.”

“But I want to hear—” Lisa protested, but Dad cut her off.

“Just come on. In the car. Let’s go.”

Tick didn’t completely understand what his dad was doing. He had insisted all summer that he believed in Tick and in his responsibilities as a Realitant, and that he would do whatever it took to support him and make sure nothing got in his way. But now, in the moment, Tick couldn’t believe his dad was going to leave them to discuss the message and its meaning alone.

He was treating Tick like an adult, and Tick wasn’t sure he liked that as much as he thought he would.

As his parents left for the garage, half-dragging Kayla and Lisa, Mom staring at the floor with dead eyes, Tick tried to push aside the swirling, conflicting emotions he felt about involving his family with the Realitant stuff. He wished he could somehow separate them into two different worlds, independent and unaware of the other. But he couldn’t. And he was a Realitant Second Class with people depending on him. He pulled out a chair and sat next to Sofia; Paul did the same.

“So, what do you think?” Paul asked.

Sofia threw her arms up. “What’s there to think? Instead of flying back to our homes, we’re going to the cemetery with Tick.”

“But my ticket is for tomorrow night,” Paul said. “Just because your parents don’t give a—”

He stopped, looking quickly at the floor. Tick groaned on the inside. The more they got to know Sofia, the more they realized her parents didn’t seem to care too much about what she did. This time they’d even let her come without her fancy butler, Frupey. But the verdict was still out as to *why* they didn’t care; Sofia refused to talk about it.

“Go home if you want,” she said with a sneer. “They have dead people in Florida, too, don’t they? Find a cemetery there.”

“Ah, man,” Paul said as he dropped his head into his hands with a groan. “You have no idea how hard it was to explain this stuff to my family. I don’t know if I can go through that again.”

“Fine. Then quit.”

“Oh, give me a break. I didn’t say squat about quitting.”

“It’s gonna be hard for all of us,” Tick interjected. “We just need to make

them understand.”

“Easy for you to say,” Paul said. “I swear your dad is the single coolest person that’s ever breathed.”

“Maybe. But none of us can quit. Ever.”

Paul leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms in anger. “Dude, quit preachin’. Paul Rogers is not gonna quit. I was just saying, man, it’s gonna be killer telling my old lady I’m running off again.”

The full load of spaghetti in Tick’s stomach was starting to churn. “Our parents just have to trust us. That’s all there is to it.”

“Yeah,” Paul agreed in a murmur.

“Okay, you know what?” Sofia said, her voice laced with annoyance. “You guys are getting on my nerves. We just got a letter from Master George—which we’ve been waiting for all summer—and you both are sitting here moping like you just found out you have two hours to live.” She stood up and started walking toward the stairs. “Let’s go look at the tube again to see if we can figure out what M.G. meant by *Spinner*.”

When neither Tick nor Paul moved a muscle, Sofia turned and cleared her throat loudly. “Come on.” She paused. “I promise I’ll be nice.” Another pause. “Please.”

Paul looked at Tick, as surprised as if he’d just seen an extra arm bloom from Sofia’s shoulder. Tick shrugged.

“Now!” Sofia yelled.

Paul and Tick jumped from the table, stumbling over each other as they followed her up the stairs.

Sofia picked up the broken metal tube and started shaking the two pieces toward the floor of the hallway. A small object fell out of one end and clinked when it hit the carpet. Paul reached it first, holding the odd thing up for everyone to see.

“What *is* it?” he whispered as he studied it.

Tick took it from him to get a better look. It was a two-inch wide, red plastic suction cup. Attached to the back of the cup was a thin, silvery metal rod bent at a ninety-degree angle. The L-shaped rod was about the size of Tick’s index finger. Tick clasped the cup in one hand, then flicked the tip of the rod with his finger. The small rod spun so fast the metal became a circular blur of silver.

Sofia flicked the rod again, watching it twirl. “Spinner. Master George is so brilliant when he names things.”

“I wonder if it’s from Chu Industries,” Tick said. “Does it say that

anywhere?”

Sofia stopped the spinning rod and looked closer. “I don’t see anything.”

“What do you think it does?” Paul asked.

Tick pointed back down the stairs. “Master George said to attach it to a blank wall—let’s try the one in the dining room.”

“Let’s go,” Sofia said, already on the move.

The Wretched Boy

The Spinner's suction cup stuck to the middle of the wall with a simple push; the bent end of the "L" pointed toward the floor and swayed back and forth until it finally came to a rest.

"What now?" Tick asked.

"Spin it," Paul said.

Sofia leaned forward and flicked the rod to make it spin, then stepped back. Without a word, the three of them quickly moved all the way to the other side of the room, pressing against the wall to watch. You couldn't be too careful when it came to gadgets sent from Master George.

Strangely, the spinning metal rod didn't slow at all, instead going so fast it appeared as a perfect circle of shimmering silver. A slight hum filled the room, like the soft sound of a ceiling fan. After several seconds, Tick's eyes started to water as they tried to focus on something. Anything. Then the Spinner changed.

A red light flared from the tip of the metal rod, instantly creating a much larger circle that took up most of the wall, a hazy, flat disk of redness. Sofia gasped; Paul let out his usual, "Dude." Tick could only stare.

"How's it making a perfect circle?" Paul asked.

Sofia answered. "It must be shooting out some kind of scaled laser."

"Ooh, like a light saber," Paul said.

"But—" Tick stopped.

The red color faded from the projected, spinning disk, replaced by a large image of Master George, dressed in his dark suit, standing in front of a fireplace, staring out at them; he caressed Muffintops the cat in his arms. The picture quality was perfect—as good as any theater—it was just . . . *round*.

"My fondest greetings to the three of you," Master George said. The sound of his voice seemed to come from everywhere at once, though slightly warbled. Tick couldn't help but wonder what kind of speaker could have such power and still be so small—they certainly hadn't noticed anything when they studied the Spinner a few minutes earlier.

Master George held out a hand. "Don't attempt to reply—I assure you it will be a waste of your breath. This is only a recording, you see. Quite nice, don't you think? The Spinner comes in handy when you get a bit depressed and want to watch an old black-and-white. It's one of my favorite things. Although, it's a bit difficult to use when you're in a forest—particularly when you're being chased by wolves . . ."

Tick exchanged a look with Sofia, both of them trying to hold in a laugh.

“Oh, dear, I’ve already gone off on a tangent,” Master George said, clearing his throat and growing very serious. “My apologies. There is a *point*, you see, to my sending you this Spinner. I must show you footage of something very frightening—something you must see and prepare yourselves to study with the greatest vigor. I want you to remember two words—*entropy* and *fragmentation*. These two things serve as our greatest challenge when studying the Realities; they are also the source of much heartache.”

Master George paused, looking past the camera or whatever was recording him. “Rutger, please put *down* that pastry—get ready to cut to the footage you filmed in the fragmenting Reality.” Master George focused back on Tick and the others. “No wonder I constantly find sticky goo on my camera. Now, I want you to watch closely. We have no sound, as Rutger had to get in and out very quickly and almost ruined the film entirely. I will narrate as you observe.”

The image on the circular screen changed. All three of them sucked in a quick breath when they saw *Tick* huddled next to a tree, shivering, his terrified eyes darting back and forth, looking all around him.

Tick swallowed. He was filthy in the film, his clothes ripped to shreds. Wind tore at his shaggy hair, and his bare feet were covered with grime. Of course, it couldn’t be him—it had to be someone who just *looked* like him. It had to be . . .

Master George’s narration cut off his thoughts. “Master Atticus, this trembling wretch is one of your *Alterants*—created last year when you made the choice to follow the Twelve Clues and solve my mystery. A branching reality was created in which you *didn’t* make that brave choice, and here you see the result.”

Tick felt like everything around him disappeared, his eyes riveted to the image of himself on the screen, his heart aching for the boy there. *How can that be me?* he thought. *Is it me? It can’t be me.* Confusion swirled in his mind like poisonous gas.

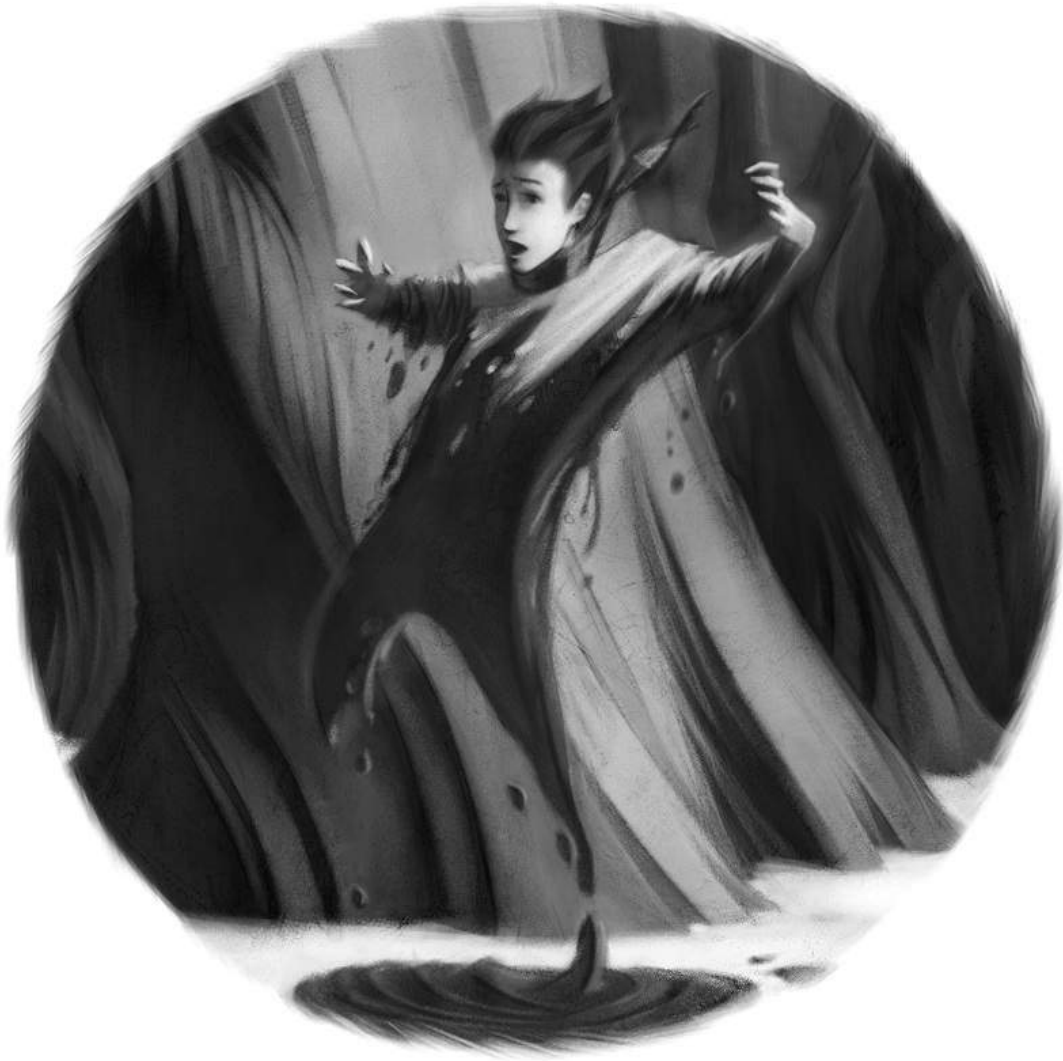
“This is a terrible thing,” Master George continued. “One of our goals as *Realitants* is to prevent this type of fragmenting event from happening. In a very twisted way, this boy *is* you, Atticus. He has your mind and heart, your goodness and courage. And he doesn’t deserve the fate that’s come upon him. Watch closely.”

The trees around the *Alterant* Tick started to shake; the brisk wind picked up even more, tearing at Tick’s pitiful, filthy clothes. There was no sound, but Tick saw the boy scream, hugging his arms around himself tighter. Above his head, the wood of the tree *vibrated*, then broke apart into a million tiny pieces, swept away by the wild wind. The other Tick screamed again,

scooting away until he hit another tree. An instant later that one liquefied into a horrific brown goo, splashing all over the Alterant. Another scream, as if the tree burned him.

The real Tick watched in horror at what happened next.

The boy on the screen started to *dissolve*.



The Entropy of Fragmentation

The image flashed to black. Master George reappeared, his ruddy face creased and frowning. “I’m very sorry you had to see that.”

Tick felt his back pressed against the wall, felt the slime of sweat on his palms. The movie had stopped before getting too bad, but he’d seen enough. The boy’s skin and hair and clothes—all dissipating into a million pieces, breaking apart, dissolving, whipped away by the wind.

That was me, he thought. *That was me*.

“Now listen closely,” Master George said. “You may already have heard the term *entropy* in your studies. It describes the natural . . . urge of the universe to destroy itself, to cease to exist, to *deconstruct*. All things—no matter what, no matter how strong—will eventually erode into nothingness, into chaos. It is an unchangeable law. All things fade away. This is called entropy.”

Master George looked down at Muffintops, petting her as she purred. “The process of entropy can take a few years or billions of years. Think about your bodies. When you die, your flesh and bone will slowly turn to dust. A towering mountain can stand for millions of years before it slowly but surely breaks down. Nothing can stop the inevitable—entropy wins. Always.”

“What does this have to do with—” Paul began to ask, obviously forgetting they were watching a recording. Master George kept talking.

“Here is the disturbing part. The Thirteen Realities we know about are solid and permanent. But *fragmented* Realities are not—we’ve told you before how unstable they are, and how they eventually fade away or destroy themselves. Now you know the reason—an extreme heightening and acceleration of entropy. And I mean *extreme*. It almost becomes a living entity, devouring everything in its path, as you just witnessed. Once fragmented, a Reality doesn’t last long—and its final moments are pure terror for the poor chaps living there. It is an awful thing.”

Master George took a deep breath. “We don’t understand all of it. There’s much to learn, much to discuss. It’s time the three of you started your Realitant studies, and this is the first lesson of many. And most importantly, I wanted you to see firsthand the severe consequences of your choices. If you’d lacked the courage to pass my tests, perhaps . . . well, it is a very deep and complicated situation. But we must stop the fragmenting. Even though we will never feel the pain and terror of those temporary Alterants, it’s very real to them, if only briefly. Makes it hard for me to sleep at night.”

Muffintops jumped out of his arms and disappeared off screen. “Very well, thank you for watching. There are many other mysteries to discuss—like the odd properties of *soulikens* and the Barrier Haunce. All in good time. We’ll look forward to the gathering of Realitants. Until then, remember your courage, my good friends. Good-bye for now.”

Master George smiled at the camera for a few seconds, saying nothing. His eyes flickered to the side, as if he looked uncomfortable. Finally, he mumbled something out of the side of his mouth. “Turn the camera *off*, Rutger.”

The screen went black, then red, then silver. The hum of the Spinner died out as the metal rod slowly came to a standstill. All the while, no one said anything.

“What was *that*?” Sofia finally asked.

Tick ignored her, pushing past and walking out of the dining room. The spaghetti churned inside his stomach, and he didn’t know how much longer he could last before throwing up. A throbbing ache raged behind his eyeballs.

“Tick?” Paul asked from behind.

“I don’t wanna talk about it,” was all Tick could get out.

He barely said a word the rest of the evening, ignoring his friends and family equally. The image of that boy on the screen—of *himself*—screaming and then dissolving . . .

How could he ever get that out of his head?

He went to bed early that night while everyone else watched a movie downstairs.

The next morning, Tick, Paul, and Sofia decided to get out of the house and talk over things—maybe do some research at the library. Tick felt a little better on waking up; every time the disturbing image of his fragmenting Alterant popped in his head, he tried to picture Muffintops. After another excellent Lorena Higginbottom breakfast of eggs and fried potatoes, the three of them headed out.

They stayed mostly silent until they reached the long road that led from Tick’s neighborhood to the town square of Deer Park. The rising sun kept the east side of the street in shade, the towering evergreens and oak trees of the forest providing relief from the late summer heat. The humidity had dipped considerably in the last couple of days, giving the air a hot but pleasant feel. Birds and crickets sang their songs in the woods; somewhere in the distance a lawn mower cranked up.

“Man, feels good out here,” Paul said, bending over to pick up a rock. He threw it deep into the woods; it cracked against a tree.

“You guys need to come to Italy sometime,” Sofia said. “In the summer,

we can go up to the Alps and cool off. Best place in the world.”

“No argument here,” Paul replied. “Florida downright stinks this time of year. You go outside for two seconds and presto—sweaty armpits.”

“Lovely,” Sofia said.

Tick only half-listened to the conversation, staring into the woods as they walked. They neared the spot where so much had happened a few months ago—meeting Mothball, the sign from Rutger about the midnight meeting on the porch, getting clues from the two of them, screaming in desperation after Kayla had burned his original letter from Master George. It all seemed like a dream now.

“—to Tick, Earth to Tick.” Paul had stopped, snapping his fingers in the air.

“Oh, sorry,” Tick said. “Just daydreaming.”

Sofia sighed. “Better than listening to Paul drone on, trust me.”

“Miss Italy, be nice to me. I might have to save you on our next mission.”

“I better update my will.”

“Hilarious.”

“I know.”

The Muffintops distraction trick wasn’t working so well for Tick as they walked. *That kid. That poor kid.* The whole concept of Alterants was confusing—especially when you threw in the whole thing about fragmented Realities. What was the difference between the Tick they’d seen in Rutger’s film, Tick himself, and the Ticks that existed in the stabilized Thirteen Realities? It made his head hurt thinking about it.

“What do you guys think of all that entropy stuff?” he asked, kicking at a pebble on the road and watching it skitter across the pavement.

“I remember studying it in science,” Sofia said. “Seems crazy that it could be accelerated like that and just . . . eat away at the world.”

“It’s freaky, dude,” Paul said. “I mean, if I decide to turn left instead of right up here, am I gonna create a nasty Reality where I get eaten alive by monster air? That ain’t right.”

“It’s weird that—”

Sofia never finished her sentence, cut off by a loud yelp in the woods to their right, followed by the sudden, rushing sound of crunching leaves and breaking twigs. Someone, or some *thing*, was running toward them through the trees.

Tick and the others froze, staring toward the sounds, which grew louder as the whatever-it-was came closer. *Crick-crash, crick-crash.* Another yelp, this time more of a short scream, echoed off the towering trunks and leafy canopy.

“What *is* that?” Paul asked.

“Maybe we shouldn’t stick around to find out,” Tick offered. Every nerve in his body had just lit up with warning flames.

Before anyone could respond, a man burst through a wall of thick foliage fronting two large trees, hurtling himself forward until he lost his balance and fell onto the steep slope that led up to the road. As soon as the skinny, dark-haired man hit the ground, he scrambled to his hands and feet and started clawing his way toward them. With growing dread, Tick stared at the stranger’s tattered clothes and bloody splotches on his shirt.

Just a few feet away, the man finally reached the road and stood up, lifting his head enough to be seen clearly for the first time. Disheveled, dirty hair framed an olive-skinned face covered with terrible scratches and terror alive in his eyes.

Tick sucked in a huge gulp of air, half-relieved and half-shocked.

It was Mr. Chu, his science teacher.

Intense Pain

Mr. Chu!” Tick yelled, running forward to help his favorite teacher, who looked ready to collapse. Sofia moved to assist, both of them grabbing an arm of Mr. Chu and lowering him to the shoulder of the road. The poor man crumpled into a ball, great heaves of breath making his chest rise and fall as his eyes darted between Tick, Sofia, and Paul. A leather satchel was slung over Mr. Chu’s shoulders with a thin strap, its bulky, sharp-angled contents clanking when it hit the ground.

“What happened?” Tick asked, fighting the panic he felt. *What if he’s dying? Did someone out there attack him?* He couldn’t help but look up at the trees, which suddenly seemed dark and ominous.

“Atticus . . .” Mr. Chu said with a dry rasp.

Tick knelt on one knee, lowering his head until he was close to Mr. Chu’s face. “What happened to you, Mr. Chu?”

“Atticus . . . I barely escaped . . .” A racking cough exploded from his lungs, shaking his entire body.

“Escaped?” Tick repeated. “From what?”

Sofia and Paul knelt right behind the teacher, both of them looking at Tick with wide, confused eyes. So far, a car had yet to pass by the woods, and Tick hoped one did soon so they could ask for help.

“From . . .” Mr. Chu whispered, starting to gain control of his breath.

“From . . . a very bad man. Looks like me. *Is me.*”

Tick exchanged a puzzled look with his friends. He’d never seen his teacher like this, or heard him say such crazy things. He’d never seen *anyone* act like this. An idea hit him. “Do either one of you have a cell phone?”

Mr. Chu’s hand shot out and grabbed Tick’s shirt, pulling him closer with surprising force. “No!” he yelled, a sharpness narrowing his eyes with a clarity that hadn’t been there moments earlier. “Help me back into the woods—we need to hide.”

“Mr. Chu, I don’t—”

“Just help me!”

With a grunt and another dry, loud cough, Mr. Chu pushed himself back into a sitting position, then held up his hands. Tick and Paul lifted the miserable man to his feet and wrapped his arms around their shoulders. Then, half-carrying, half-dragging Mr. Chu, the three of them stumbled down the small slope and entered the woods, Sofia right behind.

They made their way past a few smaller trees and then rounded a massive,

towering oak, finally finding a secluded patch of ivy-strewn forest floor with enough room for all of them to sit. Specks of sunlight littered the ground, the call of birds in the air far too cheerful for the situation. The smells of pine and earth and wood were strong—scents that Tick loved but for some reason made him uneasy at the moment.

They settled into a circle, facing each other. Mr. Chu appeared to be gaining his strength back with every passing minute, though his hands shook with apparent fear; a small drip of drool crawled down his chin. No one said a word, a silent understanding hanging in the air that Mr. Chu would tell them what was going on when he was good and ready.

“It was terrible,” he finally whispered, barely audible.

“*What* was?” Sofia asked. Tick cringed; it seemed like a really bad time for her usual impatience.

Mr. Chu continued to stare at the ground in front of him. “These men . . . with some kind of electricity weapon, kidnapped me and took me to a place that was like the barracks of a battleship—metallic and cold. They . . . did things to me. . . . Unspeakable things.” He quit talking.

“Who were they?” Tick asked. His mind couldn’t settle on any possible reason someone might want to take Mr. Chu, who was one of the nicest people Tick knew.

“It was . . . *him*.” Mr. Chu squeezed his eyes closed as if in pain.

“Him?” Paul asked. “Who’s *him*?”

“The other me. The bad me.”

Tick felt his breath catch in his throat. An Alterant Mr. Chu?

Tick looked at Sofia; she mouthed the word *psycho*. A storm of anger surged inside Tick. His face flushed hot, and for the first time since he’d known her, he wanted to scream in fury at Sofia. This was one of his favorite people she was talking about. He was just about to say something nasty when Mr. Chu unexpectedly shot up from the ground to his feet.

“Did you hear that?” he whispered, twisting and turning, searching the surrounding forest.

Tick stood, as did Paul and Sofia, the three of them looking for any sign of what had alarmed the teacher.

“Did you hear that?” Mr. Chu repeated.

“No,” Tick answered. “What was it?”

“Something’s out there. What was I thinking? What was I *thinking!*” Yelling the last word, Mr. Chu knelt down beside his leather satchel and opened it up, rummaging inside before pulling out three strange objects. “They followed me here. How could I be such an idiot?”

As Mr. Chu got back to his feet, Tick finally heard it. Coming from deeper

in the woods, it sounded like hundreds of spinning circular saws, sharp and shrill, accompanied by the horrible crunching and breaking of trees, as if King Kong himself were trampling through the forest with the world's largest electric razor buzzing at full speed.

"What the heck is that?" Paul asked, a look of alarm spreading across his face that Tick thought must surely mirror his own.

Sofia took a few steps toward the sound, rising onto her tiptoes and tilting her head as if that would help her hear better. "That doesn't sound good," she finally said.

Paul rolled his eyes and stomped his foot, clearly impatient to be away from this place. Tick felt a thick veil of creepiness hanging over him.

"They let me go; they let me go," Mr. Chu murmured, handling the objects he'd pulled from his bag. Tick got a good look at them for the first time, but had no clue what they were. All he could see were a bunch of cloth straps and pieces of dull metal.

"They let me go. . . . They knew I'd come to you. I'm such an idiot! Atticus, I'm so sorry."

Something was wrong about the whole situation, and Tick knew it wasn't just the rush of ominous sounds that were growing louder by the second, filling the air with horrible screeches of metal and the splintering crack of wood. Nor was it just the overall strangeness of Mr. Chu's sudden appearance. Something was *wrong*, out of place—but Tick couldn't pinpoint it exactly.

"Shouldn't we get out of here?" Paul said.

"Won't do any good," Mr. Chu replied, stepping close to Tick. He stretched out one of the things in his hands, two strips of cloth attached to a circular ring of metal in the middle. "Until we get these on you, they'll follow you wherever you go, until you're dead."

Mr. Chu grabbed Tick's right arm and started wrapping the cloth strips around his bicep. Tick was so stunned by the odd situation that he didn't move or resist. In a matter of seconds, Mr. Chu had snapped the metal ring around Tick's elbow, and wrapped the attached strips of cloth, like sticky gauze, in candy-cane fashion down the length of his entire arm.

"What . . . what are you doing? What is this thing?" A sick, uneasy feeling spread through Tick and he started to sweat.

"Yeah, what is that?" Sofia asked.

"You all have to put them on," Mr. Chu answered.

But when he stepped toward Sofia, she swiped his arms away and held up her fists. "You aren't touching me, you crazy old man."

The sounds—the spinning saws, the crunching and crashing of trees, a mechanical roar that sounded like something out of an old sci-fi movie—it was all coming very close, very fast. Though Tick couldn't see anything yet,

he could *feel* whatever was approaching, as if it were pushing the very air away as it rushed through the woods.

Mr. Chu tried again to wrap his gadget around Sofia's arm, but she swatted him away, then actually swung a fist at his face, barely missing. "I said, stay away!" she screamed at him.

Mr. Chu turned toward Tick, his face intense. "Atticus, I've known you and your family for a long time. I taught your sister, I taught you. We're friends, are we not?"

"Yeah." Tick looked at Sofia, then Paul. His head swam in confusion. How could this be happening? Why did he feel so . . . *wrong*? Was this a dream?

"They'll be here in seconds. If we put these devices on our arms, they won't see us. Do you hear me?"

Tick didn't say anything.

"Just wink us away again!" Paul said. "You can do it, Tick. Concentrate and wink us away. Forget this dude."

"Give me a break," Tick said. "I have no clue how I did that."

"Just try," Sofia said in a calm voice, as if she were trying to talk someone out of jumping off a skyscraper. Tick barely heard her over the mechanical chorus of horrible sounds.

"Atticus!" Mr. Chu yelled. "We have only seconds left! They . . . are going . . . to eat us . . . alive!" He pointed toward the sounds with every pause, his voice filled with fire.

"Just do it!" Tick finally said. "Sofia, just let him do it!"

"Tick, you expect me to trust this nut—"

"Just do it!"

Completely surprising Tick, she obeyed with a huff, sticking her arm out to Mr. Chu. He quickly wrapped the second device on her arm, just as he'd done with Tick. Nearby, a thunderous, ear-splitting crack of wood was followed by the sound of a tree crashing to the forest floor. The mechanical sounds whirred and buzzed, roaring like monstrous robots.

Mr. Chu worked feverishly, wrapping the third and final . . . whatever it was . . . on Paul's right arm, who protested the entire time that this was crazy and stupid and that they should *run*.

"What about you?" Tick asked Mr. Chu.

His teacher pulled out a small, rectangular object from his pocket that looked like a TV remote control. He looked down at it as his finger searched for one of the many buttons scattered in rows across its front side. Then he looked up at Tick.

"Don't worry about me," he said. He held up the small remote device and pushed the button.

In that instant, a pain like nothing Tick had ever experienced or thought possible lanced through his body from head to toe, and the world spun away, leaving him in darkness and agony.

Master George's Interview Room

Sato was bored out of his mind.

The Big Meeting wasn't for another couple of days, but Realitants had been arriving at the Grand Canyon Center from all over the world—well, *worlds*—since last week. And George made Sato sit with every last one of them, sometimes for hours, asking them questions, gathering information on their assigned areas, looking for clues on the strange happenings in the Realities. As if the long, tedious interviews weren't enough, Sato then had to compile everything into very specifically outlined reports for George's later analysis.

As Mothball would've said, it was driving Sato batty.

A lot had changed in the last few months—since the day in the Thirteenth Reality when everything he'd thought and felt for years had been turned upside down. The pain of losing his parents hadn't faded—it never would—but the anger and drive for vengeance he'd fostered and groomed for so long had been . . . altered, forged into an entirely different sword. In many ways, Sato thought that was a bad thing, not a good thing. He felt more lost than ever, floating in a pool of confusion and misdirection. The sword wasn't as sharp as it used to be.

Tick had done this to him. Tick had changed everything, forever.

And Sato didn't know how he felt about that.

A knock at the door snapped him to attention; he realized he'd been staring at a small smudge on the wall to the right of his desk. At the moment, Sato felt for all the world like he and the dirty spot shared a lot in common.

Though he already knew the answer, Sato asked anyway. "Who is it?"

"It's me—who else?" replied the muffled voice of Rutger. "Do you really have to keep the door closed? My poor knuckles are getting bruised from knocking every time."

Yeah, right, Sato thought. You've got enough cushion on those hands to protect you from a sledgehammer. "Hold on."

Sato quickly gathered his latest notes and reports and filed them away in his desk drawers. Though he'd acted the part of a trusting friend to Rutger for weeks, he still had his doubts about the short, fat man. *Anyone can be a spy.*

He stood up and walked over to the wooden door, slightly warped from a small leak that had crept through the tons of solid rock above them. He unlocked the door and yanked it open, jerking it harder than necessary.

Sato looked forward with a glazed expression, then left and right, as if

searching for someone. Finally, he slowly lowered his gaze until he met Rutger's eyes. "Oh, it's you. Down there."

"Very funny, very funny." Rutger's short, round body barely fit in the hallway. He took in a deep breath, inflating himself even larger than he'd been a second earlier. "At least it was funny the *first* hundred times. Come on. Our next visitor has arrived."

Grumbling inside—no, *screaming* inside—Sato stepped into the hall, turned and closed the door, and then locked it. Without a word to Rutger, he walked toward the welcoming room at a brisk pace, knowing the poor little man could never keep up on his tiny legs.

When Rutger yelled, "Wait up!" from behind, the briefest hint of a smile flashed across Sato's face before he swiped it away with his trademark scowl.

"Ah, Master Sato!" George said, his usual jovial self, when Sato entered the room. Even though it was August, large flames licked and spit at the air inside the stone fireplace, warming the room to an uncomfortable level. A couple of nice leather couches hugged the walls; an armchair was set at the perfect angle for someone to sit by the fire and read a book. But at the moment, the only other two people in the room were standing next to the small window that overlooked the canyon river far below.

George stood to the right of the window, dressed in his Tuesday Suit, which only varied from his Monday Suit in that it was a very dark blue instead of a very dark black. One of his hands was outstretched toward Sato, the other toward the stranger standing to the left of the window. "Sato, I would like you to meet a very dear friend of mine, Quinton Hallenhaffer."

The man bowed his head in greeting, and Sato couldn't believe the guy could take himself seriously. He wore a twisty turban on his head made up of no less than ten different colors, all of them bright and swirling in a whirlpool pattern so that it looked like Mr. Hallenhaffer had ribbons for hair and had been caught in a tornado. The rest of his clothes were no different—a loose robe with dozens of colors splashed about with no definite pattern, purple gloves, and red shoes that appeared to be made out of wood.

Sato gave a curt nod. "I'm ready for the debriefing."

George's face flushed redder than usual. "Er, yes, Sato—though I think we could show our guest a little more, er, courtesy . . ."

"Oh, it's all right, George," Quinton said, waving at the air as if to swat away gnats. He had a trilling, lilting voice, like he couldn't decide whether to sing or talk. "The boy obviously means business, which is what we need in the new Realitants, don't you think?"

"Yes, indeed," George replied, giving the slightest frown of disapproval.

“If Sato is anything, he is straight to the point.” George clapped his hands once. “Very well, then. I’ll leave you two alone. Quinton, please fill Sato in on any information you may have gathered since we last met. I have other things to attend to.”

After George left the room, Sato sat down on one of the couches, gesturing for Mr. Hallenhaffer to sit across from him on the other couch. Once settled, Sato asked the question he’d been asking first ever since the fourth such interview, when a common theme had become evident.

“Are people going insane in your Reality? Lots of people?”

Rutger was spouting off at the mouth before Mothball could say one word upon entering the kitchen. “I tell you, that boy is an insolent, inconsiderate, rude—”

“Calm yerself, little man,” Mothball muttered, grabbing the milk bottle from the fridge. “’Eard enough of yer gripin’ for one day, I ’ave. We all know he’s a bit rude, no need yappin’ off about it one second more.”

“A *bit* rude?” Rutger sat at the large table, munching on something that looked suspiciously like Mothball’s cheesecake leftovers from the night before. “A *bit*? That’s like saying you’re a bit tall.”

“Well, I am, now, ain’t I?” Mothball pulled out a chair and sat beside her oldest friend, pulling the plate away from him. “Pardon me, but I don’t quite remember givin’ ya the go ahead on eatin’ me hard-earned sweets.”

“Sorry,” Rutger said, head bowed in shame. “You know I get . . . kinda hungry sometimes.”

“Ya reckon so, do ya?” Mothball let out a laugh. “That there’s like saying Sato is a bit rude.”

“Touché,” Rutger muttered.

A long pause followed. Mothball had enjoyed seeing her fellow Realitants come to the Center over the last few days—many of them she hadn’t seen in years—though the reunions were somewhat bittersweet. The reason for the gathering was not a good thing. People going bonkers everywhere, Chi’karda getting loopy here and there. Something very strange was happening.

“Can’t wait to see Tick and the others again,” Rutger said.

Mothball couldn’t stop a huge smile from spreading across her face at the mention of the boy, Atticus. “I hear ya, there. Goin’ to give ’im a big ’ug, I will. Paul and Sofia, too.”

“I just wish it were under better circumstances.” Rutger sat back in his chair, hands resting on his round belly. “All this time we spent worrying about Mistress Jane and the Thirteenth, and then this comes along. Nasty stuff.”

Mothball thought back to several weeks earlier, when the first sign of the

craziness showed up in the form of a madwoman running through the streets of downtown New York City in the Twelfth. The resident Realitant had witnessed it firsthand, and thought nothing of it until the woman started screaming, “I can’t get it out of my head! I can’t get it out of my head!” and then *disappeared*, winking away to some unknown destination. Thinking on it gave Mothball the creeps.

“’Tis gettin’ worse,” she said. “From what I ’ear, there’s a fragmented Reality that’s gone good and batty through and through, every last one of ’em. A literal madhouse.”

Rutger huffed. “I heard there’s a town in the Sixth where every last person is acting like a cat, crawling around, purring, fighting over milk. Can you imagine how *disturbing* that must be?”

Just then, Master George entered the kitchen, his golden Barrier Wand—its dials and switches set to who-knew-what—clasped in his right hand like a walking cane, and Muffintops right at his ankles. Mothball had the odd thought that she hoped the little tabby cat hadn’t heard the bit about the people-kitties in the Sixth. Could be quite traumatizing for the poor thing.

“Having a bit of a snack, are we?” Master George said as he joined them at the table. “I must admit, I’m quite hungry myself.” He looked around the kitchen as if some food might magically appear in front of him.

“Did you get the letter delivered to Tick okay?” Rutger asked.

Master George blushed, fidgeting with the Wand. “Why, er, yes, yes, it arrived just fine, I believe. Though I might have miscalculated a bit on the exact delivery location.”

“Miscalculated?” Mothball repeated.

“Why, er, well . . . I may have sent it a little . . . to the . . . *left*, if you will.”

“The left?” Rutger asked.

Master George slammed his hand on the table. “Fine! I put the blasted thing right in the middle of their wall! And yes, I’m quite embarrassed.”

“Ya could’ve sliced someone’s ruddy head off,” Mothball said.

“I’m quite aware of that, thank you very much.” Master George looked angry, but it quickly flashed into a smile and a snicker. “I imagine it gave them a jolly good fright, don’t you?”

“I bet you did it on purpose,” Rutger said. “I know I would have.”

“But they got it?” Mothball asked.

“Yes, yes, they got it. I hope they’ll forgive me the debt of mending their wall, however.” Master George cleared his throat, then his face grew serious again. “I’m afraid we have tough times ahead, my friends. This . . . problem is growing, and we haven’t the slightest clue as to its source. If I could, I would begin our meeting this very instant. But, alas, not everyone will be here until

the appointed time.”

“What do you have planned for Tick and his friends?” Rutger asked.

Master George put the Barrier Wand on the table and absently rolled it back and forth. “Well, the most essential matter is to figure out Master Tick’s odd ability to manipulate the Chi’karda. Perhaps we can use it to our advantage in this dreadful mess.”

“Figured out where yer gonna send ’em yet?” Mothball asked.

“Oh, yes, indeed I have.”

Mothball and Rutger waited, expecting their boss to tell them the plan. But he stayed silent, staring at an empty spot on the other side of the kitchen.

“And . . .” Rutger prodded.

Master George finally looked up, focused on Rutger, then Mothball. “My dear friends, I’m afraid my plans for them are quite . . . hazardous.”

“Hazardous?” Mothball repeated.

Master George nodded. “I daresay I hardly expect all three of them to survive.”

Guilty

Tick's eyes flickered, then opened.

Though shaded by trees, the faint forest light looked like atomic explosions, blistering his eyeballs with pain, making him squeeze his eyelids shut once more. He groaned, every inch of his body feeling like someone had mistaken him for a human piñata. He hurt. He hurt *bad*.

To his right, he heard movement—the rustling of leaves, moaning. Tick brought his hands up to his face, wincing as the movement sent shockwaves of pain coursing through his body again. He froze until it died down, then rubbed his eyes. He finally opened them again, and the light didn't seem nearly as bad. Carefully, delicately, he pushed himself into a sitting position.

Darkness had crept into the forest, more and more insects revealing their presence in a growing chorus of mating calls. Paul sat with his arms folded, leaning against a nearby tree, his face set in a grimace. Sofia was curled up in a ball several feet to Paul's right, still moaning, leaves sticking to her clothes as if she'd been rolling around in them since morning. The strange devices Mr. Chu had attached to them were gone.

Surprisingly, Tick felt the pain sliding away, feeling better by the second. Pushing against the ground, he got his feet under him and stood up. Though sore, he no longer felt the pinpricks and bruises he'd suffered from just moments earlier. It was as if someone had injected him with two shots of morphine.

"Dude, what *happened*?" Paul said through a groan, stretching his arms out before him.

Tick stepped over to Sofia, who seemed to be regaining her strength as well. She rolled onto her back, blinked up at Tick, then held up an arm; Tick helped her to her feet.

"Is that guy still your favorite teacher?" she asked, brushing leaves off her clothes. "He's a real joy to be around, that's for sure."

"I . . . I don't know what—" Tick stopped in mid-sentence, staring at something over Sofia's shoulder. He squinted to see through the dim twilight, then squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again. "What the heck is *that*?"

"What?" Sofia and Paul asked in unison, turning to look in the same direction as Tick.

Without answering, Tick walked toward the oddity that loomed over them just a few dozen feet away.

"Whoa," he heard Paul say from behind him.

Deeper into the forest, several trees had *melted* into a twisting, gnarled, monstrous-looking mass of wood that was as tall and thick as a house. Several other trees had been lifted out of the ground, their roots sticking out like naked fingers, clods of dirt swaying back and forth. Tick could only stare, disbelieving his own eyes. It looked like some giant magician had grabbed dozens of trees, transformed them into liquid wood, and then smashed them together, twisting and squeezing all of it into a deformed, hideous shape.

Sofia gasped, then pointed to a section of the wood-blob near the ground. “Is that what I think it is? Oh!” She covered her face with her hands and turned around, her body visibly shuddering.

“What?” Paul asked, stepping closer to take a look. Tick joined him, and immediately saw the source of her disgust.

Somehow *twisted* into the wood was the body of a deer. Three legs poked out of the main trunk; its face was half-sunk into the wood, the one visible eye somehow displaying the fear it must have felt at the last second before death.

“That’s downright creepy,” Paul whispered.

By the time they reached Tick’s house, almost all of the intense pain they’d felt had disappeared, leaving only a weary soreness. Tick, like Paul and Sofia, had hardly said a word on the walk back, trying to figure out which had been more disturbing—the agonizing pain or the deformed super-tree with the dead deer sticking out of it.

“Could this day have been any weirder?” Paul asked as they walked up the porch steps to Tick’s house.

“Maybe if we’d grown bunny ears,” Sofia replied.

Paul let out a bitter laugh.

They walked in to the wonderful smells of dinner, all of them pausing to take a deep breath. Tick was starving. He couldn’t tell what his mom had cooked, but he had a feeling she’d felt the need to prove to Sofia that *she* could cook, too.

“So are we gonna tell your parents what just happened?” Paul whispered.

Tick thought a minute. “Maybe later. My poor mom’s worried enough as it is. No harm, no foul, right?”

“Yeah,” Sofia agreed. “Let’s just stay in the house and stare at each other until it’s time to go meet Master George.”

“Sounds good,” Tick said. “Hopefully we can stay out of trouble for one more day.”

They walked into the kitchen.

Mistress Jane felt discouraged.

She sat next to the large stone window of her apartment in the Lemon Fortress, closing her eyes every time the soft, warm breeze filled with the sweet smell of wildflowers blew up from the meadows below. The day was beautiful, the slightest hint in the air that autumn lay just around the corner. Everything was perfect.

And yet, a stinging sadness tempered all of it.

It had been four months since her Barrier Wand had been stolen, trapping her inside the Thirteenth Reality. At the time, she'd been so intrigued by the Realitants' ability to wink away with a broken Wand, and its potential implications for her, that she'd gotten straight to work—studying, experimenting, *building*. There was a lot about the mysterious power of Chi'karda she'd not yet discovered, and the little group's seemingly miraculous disappearance had led her to change her thinking. She had already made some exciting discoveries.

However, at the moment, she was very frustrated.

For one thing, her efforts to build a new Barrier Wand had hit a major snag. Frazier Gunn, the leader on the project, couldn't find one of the key elements for the wire that would transmit the Chi'karda from its Drive packet to the body of the Wand. The needed material was a complicated alloy of several rare metals, and one of them was proving impossible to find within the Thirteenth. Frazier had grown noticeably irritable, obviously realizing the potential consequences if he failed in this project. His room for error with Jane had grown very thin.

But all of this was secondary to what troubled her most.

She was starting to feel *guilty*.

She couldn't remember when it started, or when it had grown to such a staggering weight on her heart. But now, every minute of the day, all she could think about was how evil she had become. When had it come to this? *How* had it come to this? In the beginning, all she'd ever wanted was to make the world a better place, to improve life for all her fellow human beings. It was to fulfill those lofty and noble goals that she'd joined the Realitants years ago, devoting her life to studying the Realities. Though she'd never voiced her intentions, she'd planned from the first day to seek out those things in other Realities that would lead to her ultimate goal.

A Utopia. A perfect world. A haven for all people, where pain and sorrow would cease to exist. Where everyone could be happy.

That was all she'd wanted. That was all she *still* wanted.

And yet, here she was, a fierce and cruel ruler of an entire world, using its

mutated powers to create horrific armies of creatures, to repress those who opposed her, to destroy those who dared to fight back. She was a despicable, disgusting person. A terribly *unhappy* person.

But she couldn't change. Not now. She knew that as clearly as she'd recognized what she had become. It was too late for change. Her plans were in full motion, and if it took her full cruelty and reprehensible reputation to win the battle, then so be it.

She realized what that meant. She was willing to sacrifice her own dignity, her own reputation, her own . . . soul. In the end, though, the worlds would thank her. In the end, everyone would be better off. In the end, life would be perfect.

She looked to her right just in time to see her latest servant-girl, Doofus, stumble through the door and drop a tray, dishes clattering all over the floor.

The timing couldn't have been worse. Jane's *mood* couldn't have been worse.

She threw her hand forward, unleashing a burst of the mutated Chi'karda. Doofus shot into the air and slammed high against the stone wall, pinned near the ceiling by the invisible force. Choking sounds filled the room as the poor girl kicked at the air, her heels thumping the wall.

"How dare you enter without knocking, you pathetic slob." Jane's voice remained calm and cool, belying the rage and guilt she felt within. With a quick wave of her hand, she made Doofus spring away from the wall and fly across the room. Screams burst from the girl's throat as the chokehold was released. They quickly faded when the servant shot through the open window and plummeted toward her death far below.

"I'm tired of coming up with names for these people," Jane grumbled to herself.

She stood up, took one last look at the beauty of her fortress grounds, then went back to work. There was much to be done.

A Major Rule Violation

On the morning of August 22, Tick and his friends barely said a word during breakfast with his family, scared to death that somehow they'd slip up and say something about the incident in the forest. They were having enough trouble already with his mom—she kept insisting Dad should go with them, that they should demand Master George allow Edgar to be a Realitant or they would all quit.

Tick hated seeing how much his mom worried. She'd never looked so distressed and unhappy. Seeing his mom sobbing uncontrollably was just about enough to rip Tick's heart into two pieces. But he knew they had no choice, and he also knew his dad would figure out a way to console her after they were gone.

Luckily, Dad was firmly on their side, though he, too, often failed to hide the worries and concerns inflicted on his own heart.

After stuffing food and clothes into their backpacks, and after a terribly tearful good-bye with Tick's family, the three Realitants set off for the cemetery near the town square of Deer Park. Tick thought it was a little surreal, like his parents had packed him off to summer camp instead of to another reality.

"Man, your mom *really* loves you, dude," Paul said, adjusting his backpack.

"Yeah, I guess," Tick replied.

"You *guess*?" Sofia said. "My parents are just glad to get me out of the house. 'Yes, sweetie, run along to your adventures. Don't forget to brush your teeth!'"

Paul kicked a loose rock on the road. "You know my strategy—ask for forgiveness when I get back."

Tick didn't respond, unable to get the look on his mom's face out of his head.

They walked in silence the rest of the way to the cemetery.

"So good to see you!" George said for the hundredth time that morning. He reached out to shake the hand of William Schmidt, an old man from the Third Reality who Sato thought looked like someone three steps from death's door. Sato stifled a yawn, wondering why George always made him do stuff like this with him.

They stood at the entrance to the large assembly hall, a wide auditorium cut into the stone with a stage in the front and a tinted window at the back overlooking the Grand Canyon. Sato knew they'd somehow camouflaged the windows in the complex, but it still seemed like a foolish thing. He could only imagine the news explosion that would happen if they were discovered.

The Big Meeting wasn't scheduled to begin for another ninety minutes, but the Realitants had been pouring in for hours, wanting to meet and greet and speculate. Sato had never met such strange and diverse people in all his life, and couldn't help but feel amazed at the sheer effort of maintaining such an organization.

A slender woman with flaming red hair entered the assembly hall next, enough makeup on her face to hide a dozen boils. She smiled as George shook her hand, then focused on Sato, nodding her head.

"Is this one of the new recruits?" she asked, her high voice filled with a creepy sweetness.

"Why, yes, yes, he is," George replied, his voice loud and prideful. "Young Sato here has proven himself quite valuable in the last few months. A real worker, eh, Sato?"

Sato shook the lady's hand. "Nice to meet you." He wanted to add, *Would you mind killing me, please? I'm bored.*

"My name is Priscilla Persephone," the redhead replied in her slightly disturbing, shrill voice. "I've heard great things about your mission to obtain Mistress Jane's Barrier Wand. Good to know Master George can trust such . . . important duties to someone so young, instead of depending on veterans like myself."

Priscilla gave George a hard stare, then walked off to grab a glass of orange juice and a pastry.

George mumbled something under his breath; it sounded like he'd used the words *ugly hag* and *yapping dog*.

"What did you say?" Sato asked.

George waved at the air. "Oh, nothing, Master Sato, nothing at all."

The next person George greeted was a younger, much prettier woman named Nancy Zeppelin. Her golden hair and brilliant blue eyes made her look like she'd just stepped off a Paris fashion runway. Sato didn't realize he was staring until George nudged him with an elbow.

"Oh, um, my name is Sato," he said, feeling his face grow warm.

"Nice to meet you. Congratulations on joining the—"

Before she could finish, Rutger rushed into the auditorium, yelling George's name, waddling like a fat duck trying to catch its ducklings before they crossed a busy road.

“Goodness gracious me,” George said, trying to calm the short man. “What is it, Rutger?”

Rutger spoke in short bursts, sucking in gasps of air between words. “Tick . . . and the others . . . their nanolocators . . . everything seems normal . . . at the cemetery . . . but it won’t work . . .”

George reached down and grasped Rutger by the shoulders. “Take a deep breath, man, then explain yourself.”

Rutger did as he was told, closing his eyes briefly before opening them again. But when he spoke, it came out just like before. “I don’t understand . . . all their readings . . . normal . . . no malfunctions, no blips . . . but the Wand won’t wink them in. They’re standing there . . . waiting! It won’t work!”

George tapped his lips, looking down at Sato then at the mingling Realitants gathered in the assembly hall. His eyes seemed afire with concern. “Oh, dear.”

“What’s going on?” Sato asked.

“Unfortunately, I think I know *exactly* what’s going on.” George started walking toward the stage, his steps brisk.

Sato looked down at Rutger. “Do you?”

Rutger shook his head, his face so lined and creased that Sato worried he’d drop dead of a heart attack. He was about to say something when George’s voice boomed across the room, echoing off the walls. Sato turned to see George standing at a microphone on the stage.

“My fellow Realitants,” he announced. “This meeting must start immediately. Please, find anyone lingering in the halls, bring them here, and take your seats.”

“What’s wrong?” someone yelled from the audience.

George paused before answering. “We’ve had a violation of Rule Number 462.”

Tick fidgeted, rocking back and forth on his feet, wiping his sweaty hands on his pants. Sofia stood to his left, Paul to his right. The sun made its way toward the top of the sky, beating down on the cemetery with a ruthless heat. Tick hoped Master George would wink them away to a nice, cool place; he couldn’t wait to tell him about the bizarre incident in the woods with Mr. Chu. They’d seen no sign of him since, and several calls to the school had only hit the answering machine.

“Come on, already,” Paul muttered, looking up at the cloudless blue sky as if he expected Master George to float down in a balloon and pick them up. He cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted to the air, “Yo! We’re ready! Wink us, man!”

“Maybe he will once you quit acting like an idiot,” Sofia said.

“At least I’m *acting*,” Paul replied.

Sofia pulled back to punch him for his troubles when the screeching sound of a car slamming on its brakes in front of the cemetery entrance made them look in that direction. Tick’s heart skipped a beat when he realized it was his mom. She was already out the door and past the stone archway, running at full speed.

“Mom!” Tick yelled. “What are you doing?”

“Atticus, don’t leave yet!” she said, looking ridiculous as her arms pumped back and forth. Tick realized that he’d never, not once, seen his mother run before.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, lowering his voice now that she’d almost reached them, only twenty feet away.

“I have to tell you something—I have to tell you before you go.” She slowed, then stopped, sucking in air. “It’s very important.”

Tick was so relieved she wasn’t going to prevent him from leaving, he failed to realize how odd it was that she’d raced here to tell him . . . what?

“You okay?” he asked. “What is it?”

Having regained her breath, she began talking. “I should’ve told you this years ago—at the least, I should’ve told you four months ago. I—”

But Tick didn’t hear the rest of her sentence. Instead, in that instant, he and his friends were winked away to a very strange place.

A Very Strange Place

Tick got his wish in one regard—the place was cold. Beyond that, he couldn't find one positive thing about it.

They stood on a cracked stone road, small pools of stagnant water filling the gaps. The smoggy air reeked of things burnt—oil, rubber, tar. Metal structures lined the long street on both sides, towering over them, black and dirty. Tick first thought they were buildings of some kind, but that notion quickly evaporated. They were more like sculptures, the dark and twisted vision of some maniac artist.

“Man,” Paul whispered, “it’s like Gotham City.”

In some spots, wide, arching pieces rose fifty feet in the air, ending in a jagged, ripped edge as if some enormous monster had ripped the top off with its teeth. In other places, huge, towering cylinders—some taller than New York City skyscrapers—ascended to the sky until they disappeared into the menacing, storm-heavy clouds. Squat, deformed lumps sat in the nooks and crannies, like weathered statues of ancient Greek gods. Hideous carvings of animals, worse than the ugliest gargoyle Tick had ever seen balancing on the outer walls of a cathedral, lay strewn about like stray dogs, frozen in place by a rainstorm of molten metal. Random triangles and pentagons hung oddly from various structures, seeming to defy the laws of physics.

All of it, everything in sight, was made out of a dark gray metal that dully reflected the scant light filtering through the clouds above. And there was no variation—the bizarre structures and sculptures lay everywhere, in every direction, as far as Tick could see.

One word seemed to describe the place better than anything else: dreary.

“Where are we?” Sofia asked, slowly turning in a circle, just as Tick and Paul were.

Good question, Tick thought. He didn't know if he was looking forward to any locals showing up to answer it.

“What kind of people would *live* here?” he asked, trying to shake the worry of his mom and her undelivered message.

“People who like to gouge their eyes out, obviously,” Paul said. “This has to be the ugliest place I’ve ever seen.”

“They ever heard of flowers?” Sofia said. “Maybe a splash of color here and there?”

“Do you think we’re in one of the Thirteen Realities?” Tick asked. “One we haven’t heard of yet?”

“Where else could we be?” Paul answered. “Does this look like something in Reality Prime to you?”

“I don’t know—maybe these are ruins or something.”

Paul coughed. “Uh . . . don’t think so, big guy. Pretty sure we would’ve heard about a place this weird.”

“What could’ve led to something like this?” Sofia asked, sliding her hand along the flat side of a large, boxy structure, big spheres bubbling out the side of it like pimples. “How could they be so different from us?”

Tick stepped toward one of the cylindrical towers, following Sofia’s lead and touching the black metal. It was as cold and hard as it looked.

A faint buzzing sound filled the air. At first, Tick panicked because it reminded him of the Gnat Rat and its mechanical hornets that had attacked him in his bedroom the previous fall. But an instant after the droning began, a burst of light to the left caught his attention.

Near a large circle of metal, jutting up from the ground like a half-buried flying saucer, sparks of brilliant white light popped and flashed, igniting into existence only to disappear a second later, like the brief flames shooting off a welder. The sparks seemed random at first, exploding all over the place, high and low in the air, across an area dozens of feet wide, reflecting off the metal circle in dull smears of color. But then the strangest thing happened.

The sparks began to form words.

Tick thought his mind was playing tricks, the constant flashing of lights wreaking havoc on his vision. But soon it became obvious as large letters of bright, streaky light appeared, hanging in the air, flashing and dancing but remaining solid enough to read. In a matter of seconds, a wall of words flickered before them, as big as a movie screen.

Tick swallowed his awe and confusion, reading the words as quickly as possible, scared they might disappear at any second:

Inside the words of the words inside,

There lies a secret to unhide.

A place there is where you must go,

To meet the Seven, friend or foe.

Of course, an order there must be,

To hill and rock and stone and tree.

Of worlds above and worlds below,

Of worlds with water, fire, snow.
Of worlds that live in fear and doubt,
Of worlds within and worlds without.
The Path begins where dark is clear,
Where short is tall and far is near.
All this you must ignore and hate,
For you to find the wanted fate.
There lies a secret to unhide,
Inside the words of the words inside.

Tick read it three times, his eyes wide. He had no clue what the words meant, but they mesmerized him, held him captivated. He felt just like when he'd first read the original invitation from Master George.

Master George!

"You've gotta be kidding me," Tick said, surprised at how loud his voice sounded, echoing off the world of metal around them. He looked over at his friends.

"What?" Paul asked without returning the glance. He still stared at the poem, which shimmered as brightly as ever, his lips forming the strange words silently. Sofia was doing the same thing a couple feet from him.

Tick returned to the poem, quickly rereading it. "I can't believe Master George is messing around with riddles and clues again. I thought we'd proved ourselves already."

"How do you know it's from Master George?" Paul asked.

"Hmmm," Sofia said. "Maybe because he told us to go to the cemetery then winked us here? I know it's a little complicated for—"

A loud, electric *crack* cut her off, followed by a series of hissing sizzles. The letters of the poem quickly sparkled and flashed before disappearing altogether, the wispy, streaming trails of smoke the only sign they'd ever been there. Without any wind, the smoke lingered, slowly coalescing and melding into one hazy glob.

Just when everything seemed utterly silent, another loud crack of electricity made Tick jump, one last explosion of light igniting on the ground a few feet in front of Sofia. It was gone as quickly as it had come, and in its place stood a small metal box, a tiny latch on the front.

Paul got there first, dropping to his knees and reaching out for the box.

“Wait!” Sofia said.

Paul’s hands froze in midair; he looked over his shoulder. “Why? This is obviously from Master George, right? You just said I was an idiot for doubting it.”

“Well . . . yeah, I guess. Just . . . I don’t know, be careful.”

“Open it,” Tick urged. “We’re lucky he didn’t wink it into one of our skulls.”

Paul reached out again and flipped up the latch, then carefully lifted the lid open. He leaned forward and looked down into the small space of the container; Tick and Sofia stood behind him, looking over his shoulder.

Inside, there lay only a small piece of paper. Stiff, white paper—cardstock.

“Definitely M.G.’s MO,” Paul said as he picked up the message. He held it up in the scant light for everyone to see.

In the same typed writing of the Twelve Clues from their first adventure with Master George, the paper contained the exact poem, word for word, they’d just seen floating in the air like the world’s most sophisticated fireworks. Paul flipped the paper over and read another mysterious clue:

Miss Graham is the key. Repeat: you must find Anna.

“Man, he’s getting all fancy on us,” Paul said, standing up. “Why use all the Christmas lights if he was gonna send us this anyway?”

“Guess he wanted to show off,” Sofia said, taking the message from Paul. She sat down on the stone-paved road and read through the poem again.

Tick folded his arms and shivered, looking up at the sky. There was no sign of the sun, but it seemed to have grown a little darker since they’d arrived. The temperature had dropped too, and for the first time in months, he felt justified wearing his scarf. He wrapped it a little tighter, then walked over to sit on a small metal cube next to the road.

“Hurry up and figure it out, Sofia,” he said before letting out a huge yawn. “I don’t really wanna hang out here much longer.”

“You could help, ya know,” she mumbled, still studying the paper.

Actually Tick was doing just that, reviewing the poem in his mind’s eye; without meaning to, he’d memorized it. But he didn’t know what to look for or try to solve. The riddle seemed to have only one purpose—to confuse its reader.

Paul yawned and stretched. “Man, I can’t just sit here. Let’s get moving.”

“Where to?” Tick asked, looking down one length of the endless road, then the other. The heavy clouds had sunk to the ground, as if seeking warmth and companionship. The only things Tick could see were the countless heaps and angles of dark metal, covered in a mist that grew thicker by the minute. Tick

shivered again.

“I don’t know, dude,” Paul said. “That way.” He pointed to his left, then changed his mind, pointing the other direction. “Nah, that way.”

Sofia stood, shaking her head; she seemed as frustrated as Tick about the riddle. “Sounds good to me. Let’s go.” Without waiting for a response, she started walking down the cracked and pitted road.

Thirty minutes later, nothing had changed except for the air around them, which continued to grow thicker with wet, heavy mist. The world of metal was almost lost in darkness. Obscure, creepy shapes appeared and disappeared, all sharp angles and looming curves. The burnt smells intensified, as if the kids were approaching a huge factory or garbage dump.

Tick officially hated the place, his panic growing at the thought that maybe they’d be stuck here, that they’d have to *sleep* here. If the stupid riddle was their only way out . . .

He kept running through it in his mind, trying to recall the methods he’d used to solve the original Twelve Clues. Those had seemed so easy in comparison, almost childish. Magic words, thumping the ground with your foot, figuring out a day and a time. Compared to that, this new one seemed like advanced calculus.

For some reason, the lines “All this you must ignore and hate, for you to find the wanted fate” kept returning to his mind. Something told him that was the key to figuring everything out.

They approached a wide, thick span of metal arching across the road—rusty, linked chains of varying lengths hanging down every couple of feet. The chains swayed slightly despite the lack of wind. That gave Tick the creeps more than anything else, and he quickened his pace until the odd structure was way behind them.

“Spooked?” Paul asked. His voice was muffled, swallowed up in the mist.

“Yeah,” Tick answered. “You’re not?”

“Maybe.”

“Oh, please,” Sofia said. “If it weren’t for me being here, you two would be running around bawling your eyes out. Just keep moving.”

“Miss Italy, you’re probably right, but do you have to be so annoying?”

They walked for another couple of hours, but nothing changed. The path only led to more of the same—mounds of dark metal and looming, odd shapes. Tick finally couldn’t take it anymore; his feet hurt and his stomach rumbled with hunger.

“We need to eat,” he said. “And sleep.”

“Amen,” Paul agreed.

Sofia didn't say anything, but she almost collapsed to the ground, sighing as she leaned back against a black wall and pulled out a granola bar and a bottle of water from her backpack. Tick sat across the road from her, diving into his own food.

“How can I possibly sleep here?” Paul asked as he bit into an energy bar. “I don't have my feather pillow.”

Tick half-laughed, but he already felt his eyes drooping, despite sitting up. Feeling like he'd been drugged, he leaned over and lay on his side, pulling his backpack under his head for a pillow. He fell asleep instantly.

Two days passed, though the only way Tick knew for sure was by looking at his watch and noticing the subtle changes in the darkness of the sky. Tick's anxiety and panic faded into a dull indifference as they trudged along the endless path, finding nothing. For all he knew, they were walking in circles because everything looked so similar.

They grew quiet as they walked, discouragement acting as a gag in their throats.

On the morning of their third day in the miserable place, Tick finished off his measly breakfast of a candy bar, half a bottle of water, and a stale piece of bread—he was almost out of food. As he stood and put on his backpack, Paul gave him an ugly look.

“Dude, where are you going?” he said through a yawn. “I'm barely awake—what's the rush?”

“There has to be something we're missing,” Tick replied. “I think we need to get off this stupid road and climb up one of these structures. Try to get inside one of them.”

“Tick's right,” Sofia said, getting to her feet as well. “This road isn't leading us anywhere except in a big circle—everything looks familiar.”

“It *all* looks the same to me.” Paul stretched, then stood up. “Fine, whatever. It's not like I wanna retire and live on this road someday. Maybe we could try to climb—”

A loud, crashing sound to their right cut him off. All three of them froze, waiting, listening.

A metallic *clang* rang out from behind a jutting rectangle of metal, followed by a scrape, then the grunt of a man. Tick heard the shuffling of feet, then a cough. Although he knew someone was approaching the road, about to appear at any second, he couldn't move. After almost three days of complete boredom, hearing the presence of another human being was like finding an alien in his backyard.

A man of medium height and enormous build stepped around the corner of the metal obstacle, limping slightly. He had tangled, red hair and a scruffy beard; he wore a plaid red flannel shirt, dirty denim overalls, and heavy work boots. Tick was half-surprised the guy didn't have a huge axe slung over his shoulder.

When the man noticed Tick and the others, he stopped and stared at them with wide eyes. After a long, awkward pause, he spoke, his voice as scratchy as his beard.

"Well, butter my grits," he said with a heavy Southern accent. "What you chirrun doin' up in here?"

Tick didn't say anything, not sure why he felt so odd. Maybe it was the absurdity of seeing a lumberjack in a world made of metal. Sofia saved the situation.

"We're, uh, kind of lost," she said.

"Lost?" the man repeated, leaning back and putting his large hands in the pockets of his overalls. "How you reckon on gettin' lost up here on da roofens?"

Tick blinked, unsure if the guy was still speaking English.

"Um, pardon me?" Paul said, clearing his throat. "Didn't quite catch what you just said."

The man squinted, looking at each of them in turn, as if doing some deep thinking and analysis. Finally he said, "Ya'll look as twittered as a hound dawg at a tea party. Whatcha lookin' fer?"

Tick felt it was his turn. "Sir, we're, uh, like my friend said—we're lost. We're not familiar with this . . . place. Where are we? Where are all the houses and buildings and people?"

The man folded his arms, a smile spreading across his face; he had a huge gap between his two front teeth. "Boy, you must be dumber 'an roadkill in math class. You hear what I'm sayin'?"

Tick shook his head, trying to look as confused as possible—which wasn't hard.

The man stepped forward. "Boy, you is standin' on the Roofens." He pointed down to the ground with exaggerated enthusiasm. "All the people is down *there*."

Below the Roofens

Tick looked at his feet, almost expecting to see little fairies running around to avoid being squished. But of course all he saw were his shoes and a thin crack on the stone road.

“Down there?” he asked.

The man made a noise somewhere deep in his throat, a cross between a cough and the clearing of phlegm. “I reckon that’s what I said, ain’t it? Who in the guppy-guts are you people?”

Tick fumbled for words, glad Sofia spoke up first. “We’re just up here exploring, that’s all. Of course we know what the Roofens are and that we’re *standing* on them.” She gave Tick an annoyed look. “That we’re *on top* of the buildings.”

“Ain’t usin’ dem brains a’yorn too much up here, wanderin’ ’round like three hillbillies lookin’ for moonshine. No, ma’am, ain’t too smart.” The man leaned over and spat something dark and disgusting on the road.

“My name’s Sofia, and this is my friend, Tick.” She gestured with her thumb. “And this is Paul. To tell you the truth, we *are* really lost, and kind of hungry and cold.”

“Mmm-hmm,” the man said with a grunt, eyeing Sofia up and down as if checking for ticks. “Come along, then. Ol’ Sally’ll take right good care of ya.”

Paul spoke for the first time since the appearance of the strange man. “Is Sally your wife?”

The man laughed, a guffaw that hit the mist with a dull thump. “My wife? Boy, I ain’t got me no wife. You’re lookin’ at him.”

Tick was confused. “What do you mean?”

“Boy, what you mean, what I mean?”

“He *means*, what do you *mean*?” Sofia said, her voice returning to its normal arrogance.

The lumberjack threw his arms up in the air. “Feel like I’m talkin’ to kai-yotes who done got their ears chopped off. I’m tellin’ ya that yer *lookin’* at Sally, and you best not say a word about it.”

“*Your* name is Sally?” Tick asked.

“Sally T. Jones, at yer service.” He bowed, sweeping his arms wide, then righting himself. His face had reddened from the blood rushing to his head; it matched his beard. “Named after my grandpappy, who was named after his grandpappy. See, Sally’s short for Sallivent, a name older than expired dirt, ya hear?”

“We hear,” Sofia said. “You have a woman’s name.”

Tick elbowed his friend. “Be nice,” he whispered.

“I like it,” Paul said. “Beats the heck out of being named Princess or Barbie, right?”

Sally gave Paul a confused look. “I’ll eat my own dandruff if you ain’t the strangest group of chirrun I ever done seen.”

“What’s a chirrun?” Tick asked.

Sally squinted in disbelief. “*Chirrun*. Ya know—you’s a kid, a child. More than one of ya—*chirrun*.”

“I think he means *children*,” Sofia said.

Sally took a step to the side, then motioned around the back of the metal block. “You kids wanna come back with me? Get ya sumthin’ to fill dem tummies?”

“Where’d you come from?” Paul asked, leaning to get a look around the metal wall. “Is there seriously a whole city under us? Under these roofs?”

“Like I said, boy, we standin’ on the Roofens. Probably done shaved purtin’ near six months off your life stayin’ out chere for so long. Dis dirty air’ll eat yer innards quicker than a beaver on balsa wood.”

“What’s wrong with the air?” Tick asked.

Sally did his funny squint again. “I reckon you folks ain’t lyin’ when you says yer lost. These parts ’bout as polluted as my granny’s toenails. Why do you think they built dem cities under all this here metal?”

“Why’d you come up here, then?” Sofia asked.

Sally paused, his eyes darting back and forth. “I, uh, well, ya see, the thing is . . .” He scratched his beard. “See, I done heard yer little twitter feet up on my ceilin’ there, so I come up to do some investigatin’. Yep, that’s what I reckon, far as I recall.”

Tick exchanged a baffled look with Sofia and Paul. It didn’t take a genius to realize they’d already caught Sally in his first lie.

“Well,” Tick said, “we need a minute to talk about what we’re gonna do.”

“Go on, then,” Sally said. “I ain’t got a mind to bother dem there bid’ness and matter, such as it were.”

“Huh?” Paul asked.

Tick quickly grabbed his friend by the shoulders and turned him away from Sally, pulling him into a huddle with Sofia.

“So what do we do?” Tick whispered.

“That guy’s something else, ain’t he?” Paul asked. “I can barely understand a word he says.”

“I’m already getting used to it,” Sofia said. “If you ignore every third word or so, it makes perfect sense.”

“But what do we *do*?” Tick insisted.

“What else?” Paul said. “Go with this dude and get something to eat.”

“How do we know he’s safe?” Tick asked.

“Dude, get off the sissy train. There are three of us and one of him.”

“He seems perfectly harmless,” Sofia said. “I vote we go with him. We can’t walk around up here for the rest of our lives.”

“Plus,” Paul said, “he said this air’s really polluted. I’m not real cool on the whole lung-cancer thing. Let’s do it.”

Sofia nodded. “I’m dying to see what’s down there.”

Tick thought for a second. He felt uneasy, but he knew it was because their lives had gone flat-out crazy the last couple of days. Sally was definitely holding something back, and that made Tick nervous, but Paul was right—they had him outnumbered.

“All right,” he whispered, then turned to Sally. “Sir, we really appreciate the offer to go to your house. We’re really hungry, and, uh, lost.”

Sally smiled and rubbed his belly. “I ain’t said nothing about goin’ to my house. But I know a restaurant’s got some good eatin’. Come on, den.” He waved his arm in a beckoning gesture as he turned and walked back the way he’d come.

Tick, Sofia, and Paul paused. But then they followed.

Sally led them through a small trapdoor and down a very long and steep set of wooden stairs, which looked out of place amidst all the surrounding metal. The way was dark and hot, humid and reeking of something rotten. Tick felt more nervous by the second, worried they were walking into a trap, but he didn’t know what else to do. Where could they go? Who could they trust?

For now, Sally was their only friend in the world. *This* world, anyway.

They reached the bottom of the stairs and proceeded down a long hallway, their surroundings remaining unchanged. A faint light from ahead revealed black water seeping down the wooden walls. A rat scurried by Tick’s foot; he barely stopped himself from crying out like the startled maid in an old cartoon.

Sally finally stopped next to a warped door of splintered wood, an iron handle barely hanging on. “Prepare dem hearts a’yorn,” he said. “This place ain’t like none such you ever saw.” He pushed the door, and everyone watched as it swung outward, creaking loudly.

“Follow Uncle Sally and you chirrun might live another day or two.” He stepped through the doorway.

Sofia went first, then Paul, then Tick. For the next several minutes, Tick

felt as if his brain might explode from taking in the completely alien place.

Stretching before them, below them, above them, was an endless world of chaos. Long rows of roughly cobbled pathways ran in every direction, with no pattern or regularity. Shops and inns and pubs crowded close on all sides. Hundreds of people bustled about. Dirty, ripped awnings hung over the places of business, wooden signs dangling from chains. On these signs were printed the only means of distinguishing one building from another—their names carved and painted onto the wood. Places called such things as The Axeman's Guild and The Darkhorse Inn and The Sordid Swine.

Some of the pathways were actually bridges, and Tick could see the levels below, overlapping and seemingly built on top of each other. The same was true above them, balconies and bridges spanning every direction, up and up and up until Tick saw the black roof that covered everything. The ceiling was filled with small rectangles of fluorescent lights, half of which were flickering or burned out altogether.

It was the universe's worst mall.

Paul leaned over and whispered to Tick, "Dude, check these people out."

Tick focused on the occupants of the enormous indoor town. Most of them slumped along, barely speaking to each other, many with hunched shoulders or an odd limp. Black seemed to be the color of choice for their clothes, everyone wearing drab and dirty garments with rips and tears aplenty. The people's faces were dirty too, with disheveled, greasy hair. The only spots of color were an occasional red scarf or green shawl or yellow vest, worn by those who seemed to walk with a little more confidence than the others.

And the smell—it was like a port-a-potty dumping ground, a foul, putrid stench that made Tick gag reflexively every few seconds until he grew somewhat used to it.

"Sally," Sofia coughed, "I think we were better off on the Roofens."

"Quit yer poutin' and come on," Sally replied, shuffling off to the right.

Tick and the others followed, dodging through the lazy crowd of sullen, black-clad residents, who seemed to be marching toward their destinations with no purpose whatsoever. Tick didn't see one person smiling. For that matter, none of them showed emotion at all—not a sneer, not a grimace, not a frown to be found.

"We've gotta get out of here," Tick whispered, scared to offend anyone around him but feeling a surge of panic well up inside him. He didn't know how much longer he could last in this horrible place. "We need to solve that riddle, quick."

"No kidding," Paul said. "I've just about had my fill of Happy Town."

"It's not just that," Tick said, still speaking quietly. "Something's not right here—it's not safe."

Sally moved them to the side of their current path, next to a small iron table outside a restaurant called The Stinky Stew.

“Have’n yerselves a seat on dem cheers.” He pointed to the four crooked wooden chairs surrounding the table. “I’ll be back with some eats.”

As their guide entered the restaurant, a rusty bell ringing with the movement of the door, Tick and the others pulled out the chairs and sat down. Tick eyeballed the people walking by, looking for potential trouble. Seeing nothing but the unchanging mass of zombie-like shoppers, he said to Sofia, “Get the riddle out.”

Sofia did, putting the paper on the table in front of her. Tick and Paul scooted their chairs across the uneven stones of the floor until they could see the words of the long poem.

Inside the words of the words inside,

There lies a secret to unhide.

A place there is where you must go,

To meet the Seven, friend or foe . . .

Tick read through the whole thing, then sat back in his chair, racking his brain. The poem seemed to offer no direction, nothing specific to grasp onto. At least the Twelve Clues had made it pretty clear that he was to figure out a date, a time, the magic words. This was a bunch of poetic nonsense.

Sofia flipped the page over where the second note was printed. “Who are Anna and Miss Graham?”

Paul leaned onto his elbows, resting them on the table. “Do you think it’s the same person?”

“Maybe,” Sofia replied. “We should start asking around here—see if anyone’s heard of her.”

“That’s the only thing I can think of,” Paul said. He stood up, almost knocking his chair backward.

“What are you doing?” Tick asked.

“Asking around, dude.” He reached out and tapped the arm of the first stranger to walk by, an older woman in a filthy black dress, her gray hair sprawled across her shoulders in greasy strings. “Excuse me, ma’am, do you know who Anna Graham is?”

The old lady recoiled, barely casting a glance at Paul before quickening her step to get away. He didn’t give up, tapping the next person, then the next, then the next, each time repeating his question. And the response was the same each time—a flinch, as if the name frightened them.

“Dudes, we don’t have leprosy, ya know?” Paul called out. Cupping his hands together, he shouted in an even louder voice, “Does anyone here know Miss Anna Graham?” The sounds of shuffling feet were all he got in return.

Sitting down with a huff, Paul shook his head. “This is ridiculous. What’s wrong with these people?”

Tick’s thoughts had wandered slightly. Something about Anna’s name bothered him, tickled something in the back of his mind. *Miss Graham. Anna. Anna Graham.*

“This phrase has to be the key,” Sofia said suddenly, pointing at the lines near the end of the poem: “All this you must ignore and hate, for you to find the wanted fate.”

“Yeah, I thought the same thing,” Tick said.

“Maybe it means—” Sofia began, but stopped when Sally came bustling outside, clanging the door against the wall with his elbows as he balanced several plates and bowls heaped with steaming food.

“As promised,” he said, setting the meal on the table. He almost dropped one plate onto the ground, but Paul caught it and pushed it to safety. “Grab yer grub and eat. I’m as hungry as a one-legged possum caught in a dang ol’ bear trap.”

Sally sat down in the remaining chair and picked up his food with his hands; there wasn’t a utensil in sight. Tick couldn’t believe how delicious everything looked—chicken legs thick with meat, slabs of beef, celery and carrots, chunks of bread, sausages. It was so unexpectedly appetizing; he’d half-expected Sally to bring out a trash can full of fly-infested garbage.

Paul was the first to join in, then Sofia, both of them grabbing a roasted drumstick and chowing down.

“This ain’t bad,” Paul said with a full mouth, throwing his manners out the window. “Tastes a little stale and smoky, but it’s pretty good.”

Tick reached over and grabbed his own piece of chicken and a roll. Paul was right—it tasted a little old, even a little dirty, but it was like Thanksgiving dinner all the same—and Tick was starving. No one said a word as they munched and chewed and chomped their way through every last morsel of food.

Tick had just sat back, rubbing his belly in satisfaction, when a young boy in a dark suit stepped up to their table and cleared his throat. His dirty blond hair framed a face smeared with grime, and his eyes were wide, as if he was scared to death.

“Whatcha want?” Sally asked, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. “What’s yer bid’ness, son?”

The boy swallowed, rocking back and forth on his feet, glancing over his shoulder now and again. But he said nothing.

“Got some dadgum cotton in dem ears, son?” Sally asked. “I say, what’s yer bid’ness?”

The boy’s arm slowly raised, his index finger extended. One by one, he pointed at the four people sitting at the table. Then he spoke in a weak, high-pitched voice full of fear.

“The Master . . . told me to . . . he said . . . he said you’ll all be dead in five minutes.”

Long, Spindly Legs

All four of them stood up in the same instant; this time, Paul's chair did fall over with a rattling clang.

"What kinda nonsense you talkin'?" Sally asked.

The boy looked up at him, his face growing impossibly paler; then he turned and ran, disappearing in the dense crowd of mulling citizens.

"What was *that*?" Paul said.

"The riddle," Tick said, leaning over and twisting the paper from Master George toward him. "We have to solve the riddle. Now."

"Yeah, that'll be extra easy knowing we're about to die," Paul said.

"Quit whining and think," Sofia said, joining Tick to study the poem.

Tick tried to focus, reading the words through and then closing his eyes, letting them float through his mind, sorting them out. He thought of the lady's name, Miss Anna Graham . . .

Sofia spoke up, breaking his concentration. "The part about ignoring everything else—it must mean the two lines after it are all that matters—the last two lines. The rest of it seems like nonsense anyway . . . but . . . 'There lies a secret to unhide . . .'"

"*'Inside the words of the words inside,'*" Tick finished for her.

"What is *that*?" Paul said, his neck bent back as he looked up at the ceiling.

Tick ignored him, staring at the last two lines of the poem as if doing so would make them rearrange themselves. Rearrange . . .

Paul slapped Tick on the shoulder, then Sofia, who was also ignoring him. "Guys, cut the poetry lesson for a second and *look*." He pointed upward.

Far above, odd shapes crawled across the black roof, defying gravity and blotting out the sputtering lights as they moved around. Impossible to make out clearly, the . . . *things* were squat and round with several long, angled limbs that moved up and down rapidly, bending and unbending as they scuttled about. They looked like big spiders, but *false* somehow—artificial. As if their legs were made out of . . .

"Bless my mama's hanky—what *are* those buggins?" Sally asked.

One of the creatures jumped from the roof and landed on the closest balcony with a metallic clank. As it flew through the air, its awkward limbs flailing, Tick noticed a flash of steel. Another creature followed its companion, then another, then another. By the time the leader had jumped down to the next balcony, the dozen or so others had reached the first one.

Balcony to balcony, down they came.

Straight for Tick's group.

"This is gonna be trouble," Paul said.

A sharp pain built behind Tick's eyes, his mind spinning in all kinds of directions. He knew these mechanical spiders must be like the Gnat Rat or the Tingle Wraith, things sent by Master George to test them. At least he *hoped* they were from Master George.

"Inside the words of the words inside," Sofia said in a burst, her eyes widening in revelation. "Inside the *words* of the words inside!"

The spider-things were two levels away, close enough for Tick to make out their features. The long, spindly legs were jointed metal, supporting a round ball of steel with all kinds of devices jutting from its body—spinning blades and sharp knives. The clanking and clicking and whirring of the horrible creatures made Tick's insides boil.

Sofia grabbed Tick's arm. "*The words inside*. Those three words are the main part of the riddle!"

The answer hit Tick like a catapulted stone. Anna Graham. Rearranging. Tick had always loved the puzzles in the Sunday paper, everything from Sudoku to number pyramids, but one game had always been a favorite . . .

Anna Graham.

"Anagram!" he yelled, probably looking insane to his friends because of the huge smile that spread across his face. The clanking sounds of the oncoming metal-spiders grew louder.

"Yeah, but who is she?" Paul asked. "How do we find her?"

"No, no," Tick said. "Not a name—a thing. An anagram."

"What the heck is an anagram?" Paul asked, stealing a glance at the creatures, now only seconds away from reaching them.

Sofia answered. "It's when the letters of a word or phrase are rearranged to spell something else."

"Yeah," Tick said. "Whatever we're looking for must be an anagram of '*the words inside*.'"

"Yes!" Sofia yelled.

But their joy was short-lived. The first spider landed on their table with a horrible crash.

The boy named Henry ran, bumping into people, bouncing off them, falling to the ground, getting back up—running, always running. He'd hardly said one word to a stranger his whole life, living in fear of the metaspides and their all-seeing eye. They were always there, waiting, watching.

But he'd done his job. He'd said the words, delivered the message. In doing so, he'd made enough money to buy medicine for his mom for another six months. He knew the docs were overcharging him, but he had no choice. He didn't want his mom to die.

The creepy man who'd offered him the job stood in the same spot, lurking inside an alcove between two pubs. The man had paid him half the money beforehand, promising the other half when the deed was done. Henry walked up to him and held out his shaking hand. When they made eye contact, he couldn't help but take a step backward.

The man looked at the boy with fierce eyes, his brow tensed in anger, his dark hair hanging in his face. A long pause followed, filled with the sounds of the metaspides launching an attack behind him.

"You did it, then?" the man said. "You think you deserve some money, do you?"

"Y-y-yes, sir," Henry replied.

"So you do, boy. You deserve every penny. I'm a businessman, you know, and I've never faltered on a deal in my life." He reached out and tousled Henry's hair. "It's why I am who I am. Where do you think the metaspides came from, anyway?"

Henry shrugged, wishing with all his heart he could get away from this strange, scary man.

The tall stranger reached into his pocket and pulled out several bills, which he placed in Henry's hand. "Take this, boy, and use it wisely."

"Yes, sir," Henry said, turning to run.

The man grabbed his shoulder, gripping tightly. "Grow up smart, boy. Grow up smart, and one day you may work for me." The man leaned in and whispered into Henry's ear. "For Reginald Chu, the greatest mind in all the Realities."

Henry squirmed out of the man's clutches and ran. He ran and ran until he collapsed into his sick mother's arms.

For an instant, Paul couldn't make himself move. He stared down in horror at Tick, who was lying on the ground, the weird metal spider thing on top of him. Its eight segmented legs of steel pinned each of Tick's limbs while a pair of slicing blades popped out of its silver belly and headed for his friend's head. Somehow, in the midst of all this, Paul noticed words printed on the back of the spider's round body:

METASPIDE

Manufactured by Chu Industries

Just like the Gnat Rat.

He snapped himself out of his daze and grabbed the closest chair. Picking it up by the back, he swung it as hard as he could and smashed it into the creature, sending it flying off Tick and clanking along the paved stones of the pathway. Tick scrambled to his feet and joined Paul; Sofia and Sally were right next to them, staring at the thing Paul had just whacked.

The metaspide righted itself, turning to look at the group, though it had no eyes as far as Paul could tell. The thing's buddies had dropped down to the same level of the indoor mall and joined their leader in a pack, as if readying for a charge. Most of the darkly dressed people had fled the scene, somehow finding the spirit to move quickly when vicious robot spiders came calling. A few stragglers pressed their backs against the walls of the buildings, looking on in terror. The place had become eerily silent.

"I just can't buy that Master George is doing this," Sofia said.

"You chirrun ain't tellin' me the whole truth!" Sally said.

Paul tried to calm his heavy breathing. He knew the only way to get out of this was to solve that stupid riddle. An anagram of "the words inside." He quickly started visualizing options in his head, other words those letters could spell: *sword . . . died . . . snow . . . wine . . . news . . . odd . . .*

It was easy to come up with individual words, but using every last letter—and only those letters—was really hard without pen and paper.

"What are they waiting for?" Sofia said.

The metaspides stood in a line, at least a dozen of them, their bodies turning and nodding, clicking and clacking, buzzing endlessly. They seemed to be communicating, deciding what to do next. It didn't make Paul feel very good thinking that those things were smart enough to call plays, like in football.

"I don't know," Tick said. "Sally, where can we go? Where do you live?"

Sally grunted. "Ain't be leadin' them buggers to my place, no how."

"Is there a place to hide?" Sofia asked.

"Mayhaps if we go into one of dem there stores or such." Sally pointed to nowhere in particular.

This triggered a thought in Paul's head. Maybe they were supposed to figure out the *name* of a place, and go there. Maybe they'd be winked away if they made it.

"Look at all the signs," he said. "I bet one of them is an anagram of 'the words inside.'"

Tick's eyes lit up in agreement. "You're right! Every little place here has a sign out front. That has to be it!"

An abrupt whirring sound made them all return their attention to the

metaspides. The creatures had started to move, slowly spreading out in an obvious attempt to surround Paul and his friends.

“We need to split up,” Paul said. “Run around, level to level, look at every sign. It’ll be easy to find the right one. Just keep saying ‘the words inside’ over and over in your head.”

“What do we do if we find it?” Tick asked.

“Scream like bloody murder. We’ll come to you.”

The metaspides had formed a semicircle, still moving slowly, closing their trap. Every few seconds, on each creature, a spinning saw would pop out, or twin blades would scissor shut with a snap. They were like gang members taunting their opponent.

“Are you in?” Paul asked Sally.

“Ain’t got much choice, I reckon. Fine friends you cherrun turned out to be.”

Sofia spoke, her voice steady. “We need to go. *Now.*”

Paul quickly pointed out directions of who should go where. “Okay . . . ready . . . *Go!*”

Paul shot down a pathway to the left, having to run in between two of the robots. They snapped at him, but he slipped through easily. Sprinting, he made it thirty or forty feet before something became very obvious. He turned, baffled.

None of the metaspides were behind him.

They’d all gone after Tick. Every single one of them.

Flying Metal

Tick looked over his shoulder when he got to the end of the bridge, shocked to see all of the creatures following him. He caught a quick glance of Paul standing in the distance, staring.

“I’ll keep them busy—you just find the place!” Tick yelled. “Find it!”

He turned and set off running again, winding his way down another cobbled path and then down an alleyway, then back onto a wider, main road. The clicking sounds of his pursuers’ metallic feet sounded like a typist overdosed on caffeine. Tick looked up at the signs of the various establishments as he passed by.

Tanaka’s Feet Barn . . . The Hapless Butcher . . . Ted’s Cups and Bowls . . . The Shack Shop . . . Mister Johnny’s Store . . .

None of them came close to matching an anagram for “the words inside.”

He came to an intersection and hesitated too long deciding which way to go. One of the spider robots caught up with him and jumped on his back, some kind of clamping device shooting out and gripping his neck. Tick shouted out in pain and fell down. He twisted to see his attacker, but could barely move. Two more spiders grabbed his arms, another two grabbed his legs, pinching him viciously.

Tick squirmed and kicked. The rising panic thumped his heart, blurred his vision. He heard metallic snaps and whirring, like the sounds of a futuristic torture device. Something sharp sliced across the length of his back; something pointy stabbed into his left calf. Tick could do nothing but scream as the heat of rage filled him.

A new sound filled the air—something like sizzling bacon or bubbling acid, but a hundred times louder. This was followed by a booming *warp*, the sound of crumpling, twisting metal. Something knocked the spiders off Tick with a ringing clank. Their sharp legs ripped new wounds where they’d been clutching him. Pain lanced through him and all over his body. Groaning in agony, he flipped onto his back.

Above him, the indoor world had gone berserk.

Sofia found it near the very spot from which they’d entered the underground complex.

The Sordid Swine.

The rickety sign swung crookedly on a single chain above the entrance to a

squat, brick building. Sofia thought it looked like a seedy gambling hall. Etched into the wood, the three words grabbed her attention; her eyes locked in.

It wasn't obvious on first glance, but the phrase had no letters that immediately ruled it out. In a matter of seconds, she'd worked through it. The Sordid Swine was definitely an anagram for "the words inside," letter for letter, rearranged.

She turned to face the way she'd come, ready to yell out that she'd found it, but faltered. In the distance, in the direction Tick had run, she saw something impossible. After all, they were *indoors*.

But there, a couple hundred yards away, countless pieces of debris swirled and flew through the air.

It looked like a tornado.

Paul heard it before he saw it. Crumpling metal, banging, clanking, a roaring wind—it all sounded like the world was coming to an end. He rounded a corner shop and saw a spinning mass of debris up ahead, mostly made up of chunks of metal and wood, some large and some small. As he watched, a long, steel beam hit the rail of an upper balcony then windmilled, smashing through a barber shop window.

"Paul!"

He turned to see Sofia just a couple of paths over, running toward him.

"Tick's over there!" he yelled. Without waiting, he took off, crossing a cobbled path, heading for the same bridge he'd seen Tick cross a short time ago.

"Wait!" she called out, but he ignored her. He knew Tick might be caught in the middle of the weird tornado—of course, he didn't know how he could help if that were the case, but he ran on anyway, making it halfway across the bridge before he stumbled to a stop.

Tick lay on the ground up ahead, bruised and bloody, staring up into the twister that spun right above him, railings and pipes and poles and sheets of metal flying through the air in a circle. He looked to be in the exact center of the steel storm, the buildings and walls around him ripped to shreds as they provided fuel for the impossible tornado. Nearby, several crumpled metaspides twitched and sparked; one of them had most of its body torn off and another had partially melted, two limbs and a chunk of its torso reduced to a pile of silvery goop.

"What the heck?" Paul said, just as Sofia caught up with him, almost knocking him forward.

"We've gotta grab him!" she said.

“I know, but how?” He turned toward her. “You got some body armor I don’t know about?”

“Look!” she said, pointing at Tick.

Their friend was crawling toward them.

Tick didn’t understand how this could be happening. Above him, solid metal objects ripped in half, dissolved, and reformed. Everything around him had gone nuts, breaking apart and spinning in the air above him, only to melt together into new shapes. The clank of stuff crashing into each other mixed with the roaring wind, sounding like freight trains were playing bumper cars.

And he’d had enough.

He crawled toward Paul and Sofia, thankful that the raging twister was several feet above him. Worried it might drop at any moment, or that one of the hundreds of pieces of debris would fly at him and skewer him, he scrambled on his hands and knees as fast as possible. When he reached what seemed to be the edge of the twister, he pushed himself to his feet and sprinted across the bridge to his friends.

“What’s going on?” Paul asked, staring over Tick’s shoulder at the chaos.

Tick turned to see it from this angle. The twisting body of debris contracted into a thin column, spinning faster the tighter it got. The destruction sounded like a loud swarm of bees, the small bits forming a tall, black cloud. Seconds later, the mass fell toward the ground, where it landed in a lump, a twisted structure of metal, a hideous pile with several crooked steel beams sticking out. Then everything grew quiet.

“How did that just happen?” Sofia said in a dead voice.

“Yeah,” Tick agreed. “Could this place get any freakier?” He immediately regretted the question, superstition telling him the answer was *yes*—just because he’d asked.

“I found the place,” Sofia said, turning from the pile of metal junk. “A perfect anagram. It’s called—”

A loud clank cut her off, followed by the horrible screech of scraping metal. On the other side of the pile, a large door slid upward, revealing a wall of darkness behind it. A shape appeared, stepping into the light. It was huge and silver and spherical, eight massive legs of jointed steel protruding from its body.

The word *Metaspide* was spelled across it in large, black letters.

The clicking, clacking, buzzing monster was twenty times the size of its little brothers. With clumsy, yet strangely graceful movements, it started walking toward them.

“Come on,” Sofia said, grabbing both Tick’s and Paul’s arms and dragging

them after her.

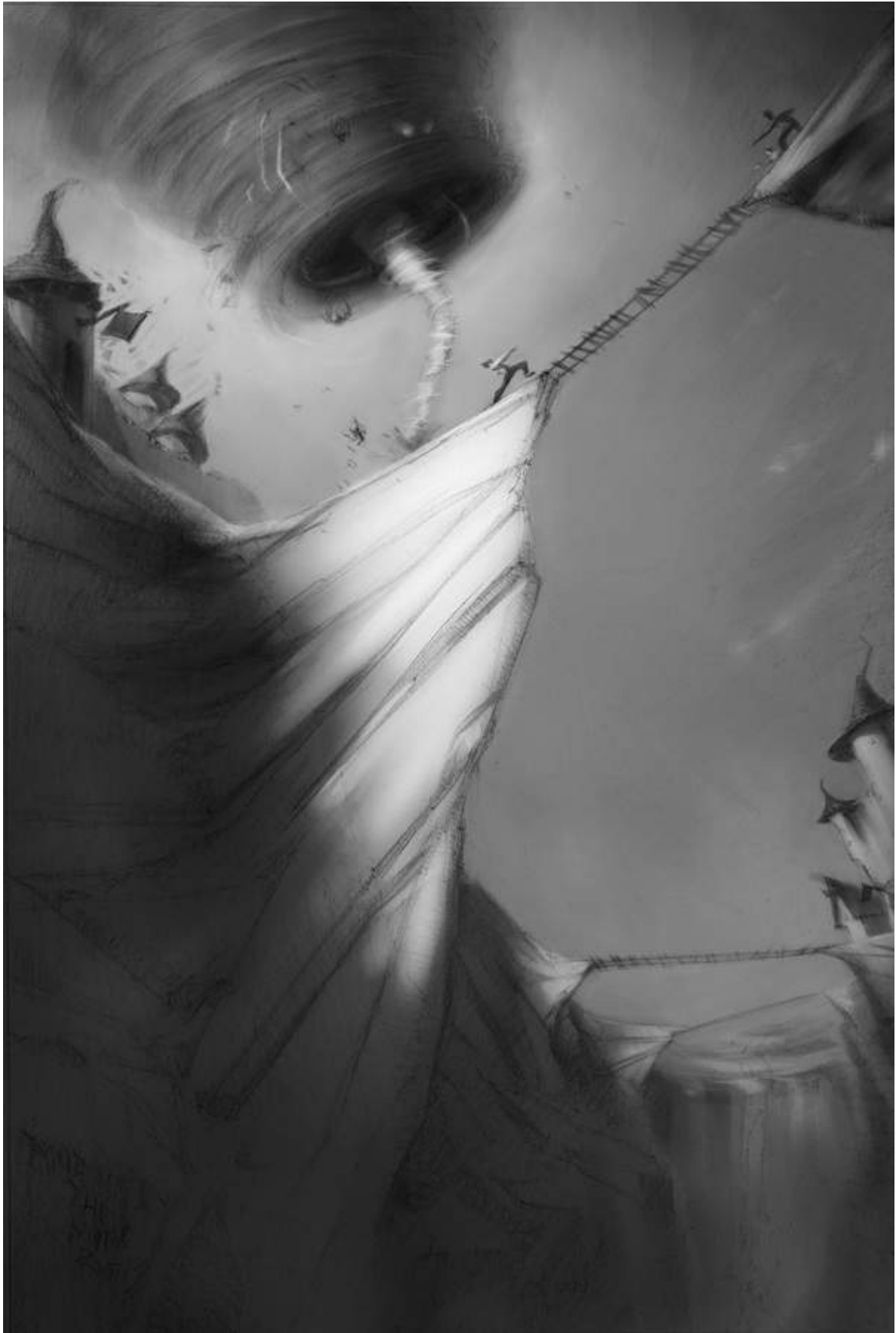
Tick cried out and pulled his arm away, wincing from the cuts on his body as he sprinted after Paul and Sofia. They reached an intersection; Sofia hesitated, trying to remember which way to go.

“This way,” she said, pointing to the left.

Before they took a step, another booming *clank!* rang out behind them, the loudest so far, like the sound of a horrible car wreck. Tick couldn’t help himself—he turned to look. The huge, clunky spider had jumped across the large gap, clearing the bridge in one leap. It crashed and rolled, smashing into a whole row of shops, obliterating them entirely. A second later, it sprang back onto its thin legs and started after them.

“*Run!*” Paul yelled.

Sofia took off on the path, followed by Paul, then Tick. The crashing and banging and clanking of the pursuing metallic monster filled the air like a lightning storm. The ground shook with the booming footsteps of the giant spider, joined by the sounds of breaking glass and splintering wood. Tick knew that if it kept gaining speed and strength, they’d be smashed to bits in less than a minute.



“How far is it?” he yelled to Sofia as they turned a corner and ran up a narrow set of stone stairs. They reached a wide alleyway and kept running.

The smash of shattered buildings thundered from behind as the monster forced its way after them, destroying everything in its path.

“We’re almost there!” Sofia answered.

They rounded the next corner to see Sally running straight toward them, covered in dirt, his face lit up with fear. “Dadgum world’s endin’!” he screamed. Then his eyes rose up to look over them, his mouth falling open. “How’d it get so big!”

Sofia grabbed Sally by the arm as she ran past. “Just come on!”

He stumbled until he got his feet set and joined the escape.

Tick saw it before Sofia pointed. A crooked sign indicating The Sordid Swine, swinging on a single pathetic chain. The clanging sounds of pursuit were getting closer and closer.

Paul passed Sofia, ripping the wooden door of the shop open. All four of them stumbled across the threshold and into The Sordid Swine without so much as a peek behind them, afraid that looking would somehow allow the metal monster to gain ground. Sally was last, slamming the door shut, leaving them in almost complete darkness. A shaft of pale light from a small window gave the musty room a haunted glow. The place was empty except for a crooked wooden chair in the corner.

“What now?” Sofia whispered.

Before anyone could answer, something smashed into the wall from the other side, shaking the room and sending a cascade of debris rattling down the brick walls. The group instinctively ran across the room to get as far away from the door as possible, pressing their backs against the brick wall. The giant metaspide slammed into the wall again, then again; a hinge broke, rattling to the floor. Light seeped through the broken door.

“What are we supposed to do now!” Sofia yelled.

Another crash rattled the door—half of it broke apart and tumbled to the ground. The spider was too big to fit through the hole, but a nasty-looking piece of steel came shooting in, sharp as a blade on one edge, swiping around like a cat trying to get a mouse out of its hole. It was nowhere close to them.

Yet.

“Tick,” Paul said, “sure’d be nice for you to use those nifty superhuman winking powers right about now.”

“Would you shut up—I don’t know how I did that!” Tick yelled back, sick of everyone expecting him to be the stinkin’ Wizard of Oz. He wished he hadn’t said it as soon as it came out.

“Whoa,” Paul said, looking hurt. “Sorry, dude.”

“Guess we were wrong about the anagram thing,” Sofia said.

“No, we weren’t,” Tick said, pushing aside his regret at yelling at Paul.

“There has to be something. *Think.*”

The huge metaspide slammed into the door again, making the hole bigger. Several bricks clattered across the ground. Its blade-arm swiped a little closer, only a few feet away.

“You cherrun better get me on out dis here mess,” Sally said. “Ain’t too particular ’bout how ya’ll do it, neither.” He grimaced as the metal arm swung close enough to stir his hair as it passed.

“The only thing in here is that stupid chair,” Paul said. The rickety thing sat in the corner, looking like a sad punishment place for a naughty child.

“Well,” Tick said, “then maybe we’re supposed to do something with it.” He felt defensive, like his inability to recreate the winking trick he’d pulled off in the Thirteenth Reality made him responsible to figure out another solution.

“What can we do with a *chair*?” Paul retorted.

“I don’t know!” Tick snapped back. The room shook again with another ram from the spider; an alarming chunk of the entrance crumbled to the ground, the hole getting wider. A second metal arm squeezed through, two rough blades attached at the end, snapping together like alligator jaws.

“Boys!” Sofia said. Tick was shocked to see her smiling. “You’re so busy thinking, you forgot to use your brains.”

With a smirk, she darted over to the corner, ignoring the steel blade of death that sliced through the air a few inches from her shoulder. Then she sat down on the chair.

The second her bottom touched the warped wood of the seat, she disappeared.

The Council on Things That Matter

Tick felt like an idiot. Sofia was right; sometimes they thought *too* much.

He grabbed Paul by the shoulders and pushed him toward the chair, following right behind. “Hurry!” A blade whipped past his left shoulder, slicing his shirt.

Paul reached back and shoved Tick against the bricks. “Careful, dude. Inch along the wall.”

Sally stood next to the chair, looking confused as he glanced back and forth between the chair and Tick. Paul and Tick scooted along the wall until they reached the corner.

“Sit down, Sally!” Paul yelled. “Don’t worry, it’ll take you somewhere safe.”

Sally didn’t reply but leaned toward Tick’s ear until Tick could feel Sally’s beard scratching his cheek.

“What are you doing?” Tick asked, feeling uncomfortable. “You need to tell me something?”

“Just lookin’ at yer dadgum ear, boy.”

Before Tick could stop him, Sally reached up and rammed his pinky finger into Tick’s ear canal. Tick stumbled backward into Paul’s arms, a sharp pain exploding inside his head like an eardrum had just ruptured. The pain went away as soon as it had come, and Paul helped him back to his feet.

“What’d you do that for?” Tick yelled at Sally, glaring at the man who’d seemed completely harmless until that very moment.

“Weep to yer mama, boy, not me.”

Sally sat down on the chair, not bothering to hide the grin on his face. He shrugged his shoulders as if to say, *Sorry, can’t help myself*, and disappeared.

“What in the world was that all about?” Paul asked.

“No idea,” Tick replied. “But we’ve gotta get out of here.”

“You first,” Paul said.

Tick wanted to argue, act brave, be the last one out. Then he realized that’d be the stupidest thing in the world and hurried to sit on the chair. Every second they wasted meant the spider was that much closer.

He had just enough time to see the entire front of the building collapse in a swirl of dust and flashes of metal before everything around him turned bright.

Sofia stood on a slippery slope of rust-colored sand, squinting in the brilliant sunlight at the small, iron chair that stood rigid on top of the dune as if held in place by magic. She'd stood up and gotten away from it the second she'd winked there, not wanting someone else to come through and squish her.

Tick showed up a minute later, an instantaneous appearance that shocked her even though she'd been expecting it. There was no effect—no smoke, no sound. One moment the chair was empty. The next, it wasn't. Tick's face looked like he'd just bungee-jumped off the world's tallest bridge.

"What took you so long? Hurry. Get up," Sofia said, slipping in the sand as she stepped forward to help him, sliding down the steep dune. The hot sand seemed to find its way through every teeny hole of her clothes and scratch at her skin.

Tick didn't answer, but stood up and was making his way down the loose sand to Sofia when Paul appeared, a small cut on his right cheek.

"Dang thing got me," he said, wiping the blood away with his fingers. "Couple more seconds and I'd be . . ."

He trailed off, looking around him with huge eyes.

With her friends safe, Sofia finally had a chance to take a good look at their surroundings as well.

They stood in the middle of an enormous desert, an endless sea of dunes stretching for miles in every direction. The white-hot sun blazed down so the distant horizons shimmered in a wavering haze. The only thing breaking the monotony of sand was a large, shiny pipeline about a half-mile away. The tube of opaque glass sat above ground, at least twenty feet in diameter, and ran from one direction to the other for as far as Sofia could see.

"Where are we?" Paul asked. "And what *is* that?" He motioned to the giant pipe.

"Looks like a huge straw," Tick said. "Maybe a giant sand monster dropped it."

Sofia ignored them and started walking toward the glass structure. Her heart hammered in her chest, a rise of panic as she thought about their situation. They'd just barely escaped a horrible metallic spider and now they were stuck in the middle of a scorching desert. Anger at Master George rose in her as well. *How can he waste our time with this? What if we'd been killed?* But deep inside, she didn't think it was him. Something had gone wrong.

"Wait!" Paul called from behind her. "Where's Sally?"

Sofia stopped; she'd completely forgotten about the odd man. She turned and said, "Maybe he didn't want to follow us."

Paul was standing on the dune next to the chair, looking around. "No way

—he winked away before we did.”

“Yeah,” Tick said, also searching. “He went right after you.”

Sofia felt a disorienting chill in her gut. “Well . . . he never showed up here. I’ve been watching the chair since I winked in.”

Paul stumbled through the soft sand to stand next to Sofia; Tick joined them as well. Both of the boys had baffled looks on their faces, still glancing at the chair now and then as if expecting Sally to show up.

“You’re *sure* he didn’t wink in?” Paul asked.

Sofia rolled her eyes. “Yes, I’m sure. Where would he possibly hide?”

“Dude,” Paul whispered, and that one word summed up how they all felt.

“What could’ve happened to him?” Tick asked. “Why would *we* wink here and not him? And what was up with him poking me in the ear?” He rubbed at the side of his head.

“What?” Sofia asked.

“Right before he winked away,” Tick explained, “he acted all weird and slammed his finger into my ear. It hurt, too. Then he sat down and disappeared.”

“He slammed his finger into your *ear*?” Sofia repeated. “While a giant spider monster was trying to kill you?” It was such a bizarre thing, she couldn’t believe she’d heard him correctly.

Tick shrugged. “Don’t ask me—maybe he went crazy from the panic.”

“What if he’s in trouble?” Paul asked. “I like him—we need to help him. Even if he did try to stab you in the brain.”

Sofia felt the same sadness at Sally’s disappearance. He’d been so humble and sincere; there was just something likable about him. But she also knew that standing there waiting on a nice sunburn wouldn’t help anybody.

“Not much we can do,” she said. “Someone must’ve sent us here for a reason. Let’s go check out that glass thing.” She pointed at the tube that looked like a giant crystal worm stretching into the distant horizon.

“What if Sally shows up and we’re not here?” Paul said.

“He’s an adult,” Tick said. “He can take care of himself or come find us. I agree with Sofia—we should see what that thing is.”

Sofia started walking again. “Come on, then.”

Paul and Tick joined her, all of them marching as best they could up and down the slippery, hot dunes.

Master George sat at the head of a long, wooden table, looking around at the few people he’d asked to join him in this special Council on Things That Matter. His last guest had yet to appear, and Master George hoped he would

arrive soon. It had been a near thing, winking him away as fast as he had. A large fire roared in the hearth at his back, but it wasn't enough to rid him of the chill that iced his heart. Things were going badly. Very badly. He reached down and petted Muffintops, who purred and rubbed her back against his leg.

Most of the other Realitants had left the Grand Canyon complex already, carrying out various orders and missions agreed upon by the larger meeting earlier. That was good. Things would be said here that not everyone should hear.

Mothball sat to his left and Rutger to his right, balanced precariously on his booster seat. To Rutger's right was Sato, looking as bored as ever, ready to take notes. Then came Nancy Zeppelin, wrapping and rewrapping a long string of her golden hair around a finger; William Schmidt, his ancient face pulled down into a frown that made him look like the Grim Reaper; Katrina Kay, her buzz-cut hair framing a pretty face with eager eyes; Priscilla Persephone, invited only because Master George knew he had offended her enough already (oh, how he hated that snooty smirk on her face; and her *hair*—it was orange, for heaven's sake). Finally, next to Mothball on his left, sat Jimmy "The Voice" Porter. His nickname was sadly ironic now because the poor man's tongue had been ripped out by a slinkbeast in the Mountains of Sorrow in the Twelfth Reality.

"Very well," Master George said. "I think it's time we begin."

"Yes, *let's*," Priscilla said in her annoying, lilting voice. "We've only been waiting on you. Wasting valuable time, no doubt."

Rutger shifted forward in his seat, a slight rolling motion that brought his arms and hands to rest on the table. "Priscilla, why don't you open up a can of shut the—"

George quickly interrupted his loyal friend. "Yes, Priscilla, I appreciate your patience." He wanted to add that perhaps she'd like to take on a mission to the icy wastelands of the Third Reality, but refrained. "We have much to talk about, indeed."

"Wasting time," Rutger mumbled under his breath. "I'll show you . . ." The rest was too low to hear, but Master George thought he caught the words *rat fink*.

"First things first," Mothball said. "Methinks we best be talkin' 'bout Master Tick and his friends."

Master George agreed. "Yes, yes, quite right, Mothball. Based on the evidence, I have no doubt that someone has violated Rule Number 462 and taken hostage the nanolocators implanted in our dear young friends from Reality Prime. We can track their general location, but nothing more—and even that signal is weak. We have tried repeatedly to wink them here, but they have remained out of our reach. This act violates no less than three Articles of

Principles established by the First Realitant Symposium of 1972. It is outrageous, despicable, irresponsible, reprehensible—”

“We get the point,” Rutger said.

Master George slammed his hand on the table. “Yes! I hope you do, Master Rutger, because this is very serious indeed. Not only can we not wink in our most important recruits in years, but we have a renegade out there capable of such things as hijacking a nanolocator! The technology for such an act—”

“It has to be him,” Nancy Zeppelin interrupted quietly. “Has to be.”

A long moment of silence passed, broken only by the crackling fire. Master George closed his eyes. No one in the room doubted who the culprit could be. But if Reginald Chu had finally decided to use his significant technological powers to branch out and cause trouble in other Realities, then they were all in for a great deal of trouble. Until today, they’d all hoped, perhaps foolishly, that Chu would be happy ruling his own world with an iron fist.

“Yes, Nancy,” Master George finally said, opening his eyes and sighing. “We should all be quite nervous that Reginald Chu would stoop to such a thing. He obviously has plans for our new friends.”

William Schmidt cleared his throat, a wet, gurgling hack that made Master George wince. Then the old man spoke in his ghost-soft voice. “Chu’s spies must have learned of Higginbottom’s mysterious winking ability. Chu would do anything to have him under his control.”

“For all we know,” Katrina said, “Tick is strapped on a laboratory bed as we speak, his brain being examined for anomalies.”

Master George held up a hand, wanting the terrible talk to stop. “We must keep our minds on solutions, my dear associates. Solutions. And we mustn’t give up hope. Master Atticus is a special boy, as are his friends, and their recovery is our number-one priority.”

“What about all the people going crazy everywhere?” Priscilla asked. “That should alarm us a little bit more than a few missing brats.”

Mothball stood up—Master George reached out too late to stop her. She towered over everyone, her suddenly angry glare focused on Priscilla. “One more nasty word about them three children, and I’ll lop off yer ’ead, I will. That’s a promise.”

“Yeah,” Rutger chimed in. “And I’ll bite your kneecaps.”

“Please, let’s all remain calm,” Master George said. “Mothball, please be seated. I appreciate your concern for Atticus and his friends. Priscilla hasn’t met them, of course, so let’s give her time to appreciate their importance.”

Mothball sat, not taking her eyes off Priscilla, whose suddenly pale face made her look like she might never speak again.

“Now, er, we do need to talk of this matter,” Master George continued. “Sato here has put together a summary of his interviews, and the reports of

people going insane are numerous, indeed. Something is very wrong, and it's spreading throughout the Realities at an alarming rate. Almost like a—”

“Disease,” Nancy Zeppelin said. “Like a disease.”

Master George paused, studying the beautiful woman as he thought about what she said. She didn't look back, staring at the table in front of her with a blank expression.

“Yes,” he finally said. “Yes, quite like a disease, actually. The pattern shows it spreading from a fragmented Reality—all cases link back to it eventually, with no exception. It is *exactly* like a disease or a virus.”

“Need a sample, then. One of the crazies,” Mothball said.

Before Master George could reply, an urgent knock rapped at the closed door from the hallway. Finally. Perhaps now they would have some answers. He stood up. “Mothball—”

The door opened before she could do anything. A wave of relief washed through Master George as he saw one of his oldest friends enter the room, though he looked like he'd just taken a bath in a pile of dirt—his overalls were *filthy*.

“Master Sally,” George said, smiling.

Sally grinned through his thick, red beard. “It was harder ‘an findin’ a tick on a grizzly bear, but I did it.”

“Did what?” Rutger asked, shocked.

“I found dem kids a’yorn.”

Part 2

The Beast in the Glass

Nice Mistress Jane

Frazier Gunn was worried about his boss.

As he walked up the winding stone staircase of Mistress Jane's tower, enjoying the smell of burning pitch from the torches ensconced on the hard granite walls, he wondered which version of her would answer the door. The flickering, spitting flames cast haunted shadows that seemed alive, hiding and reappearing like dark wraiths. A team of seven servants maintained the torches throughout the Lemon Fortress, even though Jane probably could have lit the place using only her growing abilities in the mutated Chi'karda.

But she had her own way of doing things, and that was that.

Frazier felt a trickle of sweat slide down his right temple as he passed the halfway point. He'd been sick the last few days, unable to keep any food down, and he felt the effect of his illness now. He almost paused to rest, but his pride wouldn't let him. He kept moving up the staircase, step by step.

His thoughts slid back to Jane's recent mood swings—episodes of inexplicable kindness mixed in with the usual displays of anger and violence. He'd witnessed with his own eyes several of the bizarre occurrences. Just the other day, he'd almost swallowed his own tongue when he saw his boss help her servant Brainless clean up a broken dish Jane had slammed against the wall. The child's face had paled during the incident, sure it was a trap, but when they finished, Jane apologized for losing her temper, dismissed her with a wave, and went back to work.

Frazier would've been less surprised to see a duck-billed platypus knock on his door and ask for tea.

Rumors of other surprising acts had spread through the castle like flames through a heat-wilted cornfield. Stories of kind words, apologies, thank-yous, compliments. Tales of Jane using her special powers to help servants lift heavy objects. It was crazy. Frazier had known this evil woman for years, and he couldn't reconcile in his brain how it could be the same person. And yet, interspersed among these un-Jane-like anomalies, there were many moments where she exploded in rage, sometimes worse than ever before.

The whole thing was fishy, and in an odd way, Frazier longed for the days when Jane acted the tyrant every minute of every day. At least then he'd known what to expect.

He finally reached the top step, pausing to take three long breaths to calm his heart. He wiped the sweat from his face, not wanting Jane to see him so weak. After a very long minute, he finally crossed the stone landing and

knocked on her wooden door.

It disappeared in a swipe from left to right, as if it had slid into the stone. It was only a trick, however, a manipulation of Chi'karda. Jane loved using her power for such trivial things, always opening her doors in creative and unexpected ways. One time she'd simply made it explode outward in a spray of dagger-like splinters, permanently scarring the poor sap delivering her mail.

Jane stood there, dressed in a simple yellow gown, her feet and hands bare. Her emerald eyes shone, almost glowing like green embers. Something was off, though. For a second, Frazier couldn't figure out why she looked so odd, but then it hit him.

Jane had a layer of stubble growing across her head, tiny black sprouts of hair. Never—not once since he'd first met her so long ago—had Frazier ever seen so much as one hair on her head. She'd always insisted on baldness for some mysterious reason. Frazier balked and looked toward the floor, almost as if he'd caught her unawares coming out of the bath.

“Good morning, Mistress,” he said, keeping his eyes down. “I've come to report the latest on the Barrier Wand, and to, uh, report some interesting news.”

“Frazier, dear Frazier,” Jane said, her voice soft. “Please, come in.”

He looked up to see she had moved aside, gesturing toward her large, yellow velvet couch, beside which a fresh fire burned in the comforting hearth, its bricks freshly painted her favorite color. Clearing his throat, using every ounce of his will to avoid a single glance at her head, Frazier stepped past her and took a seat, sinking into the wonderfully comfortable cushions.

Mistress Jane sat next to him on his right, crossing her legs so that she faced him only a foot away. The fire reflected in her bright eyes, seeming to ignite them into some odd, molten metal. Frazier didn't like this. No, he didn't like this one bit.

“Frazier,” Jane said, reaching out to caress his arm, just once, before clasping her hands in her lap. “I know people are talking about me—about my . . . change.”

Frazier cleared his throat, faked a cough, hoping to buy time. He didn't know how to respond to this. “Um, yes, Mistress, the servants have said some very . . . um, nice things about you. They are, of course, very grateful when you, uh, show them kindness.” He stopped; every word that came out of his mouth sounded worse than the one before it.

“*Kindness?*” she said with a disgusted tone, as if the word were a highly contagious disease. “That's the best they can come up with? *That's* how they honor my attempts to elevate my leadership skills?”

“Well,” he said, doing his best to speak clearly without stuttering. “No, I

meant, well, I just meant they're noticing your efforts, saying many *different* words—all very glowing words, actually. Your esteem has skyrocketed in their eyes. In, uh, mine, too.”

Jane folded her arms, glaring directly into Frazier's eyes. “Do you think I'm stupid, Frazier?”

She's going to kill me, he thought. Right now, after all these years, she's going to kill me because she's finally gone completely and totally insane.

“Stupid?” he repeated. “Of course I don't think you're stupid.”

Jane leaned over and whispered in his ear. “Then don't *speak* to me like I'm stupid.”

She sat back, looking at the fire, her face expressionless. After several seconds, Frazier followed her gaze and caught his breath.

Several burning logs had floated up into the air and out of the main hearth, hovering above a rug made from the skin of a scallywag beast. Sparks and hot cinders fell from the logs, igniting several long hairs of the soft fur, which flared and died out quickly. A mess of white ash flew up from the fireplace, swirling around the flames in midair in fancy patterns, spelling words and making faces. Frazier felt a familiar icy fear in his gut, thinking of such power in the hands of a woman as unstable as Mistress Jane.

With a hiss and crackle, the whole show collapsed back into the fireplace; in seconds, it looked like the fire hadn't been disturbed at all.

“Now,” Jane said, folding her arms and returning her focus to Frazier. “I know people are worried that my attempts to change are insincere. If anything, they seem *more* frightened of me than ever. Correct?”

Frazier nodded, not daring to say a word.

“This doesn't bother me. Not in the least. I've been . . . *unwise* in some of my leadership methods. Perhaps even cruel. I know it will take time—a long time—to change.” Jane shifted in her seat, looking toward the window on the other side of the room, muted light from the cloudy day spilling through onto her bed. “All I ever wanted was to make things better, Frazier. That's all I still want. If I need to adapt how I rule things, then so be it.”

She turned her neck, looking once again at Frazier, her eyes narrowed. “But we *will* take over the Realities. We *will* spread the goodness and power of the Chi'karda from the Thirteenth Reality to the others. And in the end, we will make the universe a better place for all. This, I promise you.”

Frazier nodded again, throwing all the sincerity he could into his expression. Jane's words, filled with passion, had moved him greatly. He remembered why he had followed this woman for so many years, despite the constant danger. He remembered . . . and felt ashamed of the many times he'd hoped to topple her and take over.

“Mistress Jane,” he said. “I . . . I . . . I don't know what to—”

“Say nothing,” she snapped, a sudden thunderclap shaking the room. It was a trick she performed often. “You’ve earned yourself back into my full graces. You’re my most loyal servant. You will be beside me, always. Nothing else needs to be said.”

A long pause followed, thoughts churning inside Frazier’s mind. *How do I act now? What do I say?* His fear of Jane hadn’t diminished in the least—if anything, it had grown stronger.

Thankfully, Jane got back to business. “You said you had an update on the Barrier Wand and some interesting news. Well, get on with—” She paused, forcing a smile. “Please, report.”

Frazier leaned forward, grunting as he pulled himself out of the soft cushions, and put his elbows on his knees. “They’ve found a place in a small mountain range about five hundred miles away—they’ve spotted signs of ore. It looks encouraging. The Diggers are hunting as we speak. As soon as they find a deposit, I’ll let you know.”

“Once they do,” Jane said, “we should need only two or three more weeks.”

“That’s right. The metal is the last thing we need to reconstruct the Wand.”

Something floated up from a shelf near the bed, flying through the air and landing with a thump in Jane’s outreached palm. She held it out for Frazier to see—a complex bundle of wires, pipework, gears, and nanochips—the Chi’karda Drive she’d removed from her previous Barrier Wand. The one Atticus Higginbottom had stolen.

“What’s the other news?” Jane asked.

Frazier shifted uncomfortably. His news was very strange, and he worried about her reaction. “Well, some of our hunters discovered an interesting . . . thing.” He paused, unsure how to proceed.

“A *thing*?” Jane repeated. “Your descriptive skills are less than apt, Frazier.”

“Sorry.” He rubbed his hands together. “I guess I’ll just say it how it is.”

“Brilliant idea.”

Frazier tried to laugh, but it came out as a snort. “Way out in the Forest of Plague, near the spot of the old battleground, they found a place where hundreds of trees have been cut down. Each stump is perfectly flat, as if the trees had been cut with a laser or something.”

Jane tilted her head, obviously intrigued. “Interesting. I can’t think of anyone . . .”

When she trailed off, looking at the fire, Frazier continued. “Right, no one in our Reality has that kind of technology. But, um, that’s not the weird part. Not even close.”

That caught Jane's attention; her eyebrows rose.

"The trees . . ." Frazier said.

"Did someone take them? Did they burn them? That area has enormous trees—some taller than the fortress."

Frazier shook his head. "I know, which makes the next part really bizarre. I couldn't tell what had happened until I flew on the back of a fangen and looked down from above."

"What do you mean?" Jane asked.

"Somehow, whoever cut those trees down . . . *arranged* them on the ground so they spelled out words."

"Spelled out words?" Jane repeated. "With *trees*?"

"Yes. They formed letters out of the tree trunks. Really big trees that made really big words." He laughed at himself but stopped abruptly.

"What did they say?" Jane asked, not smiling.

Frazier braced himself, knowing he had no choice but to repeat the mysterious message word for word.

"It said, 'Mistress Jane, you are a coward. Come and find me.'"

Tunnel of Glass

Tick slid his hand along the warm, hard glass of the big tube as he walked beside it in disbelief at the sheer height of the structure. It rose at least twenty feet above him, maybe more, and appeared to be a perfect cylinder. The bottom third was buried underneath the shifting sands of the desert. The glass was clear, but so thick he couldn't tell what lay inside the big pipe; he could only see distorted images of varying color.

“Okay,” Paul said. “I’ve seen some strange stuff since hanging out with you two, but this might beat all.” He stepped back and spread his arms wide, looking up at the curved glass. “What could this thing possibly be?”

Sofia squatted on the ground, digging through the sand to see if the structure changed at all underneath. “Looks like it just keeps curving in a perfect circle. Maybe if we dug all the way to the bottom we’d figure something out.”

“Do I look like a shovel to you?” Paul asked.

“Well . . . actually, you kind of do,” Sofia said. “You look like a shovel with crooked ears.”

Tick ignored them, walking along with his hand pressed against the glass, hoping for some change or sign of what they were supposed to do next. Sweat soaked his clothes, the sun beating down on them as if trying to cook them for dinner. He could feel his skin beginning to burn—especially his neck. In all the chaos with the giant spider robot monster, he’d lost his scarf.

What is this thing? he thought as he studied the glass structure. Master George—if it really had been him—must have sent them here for a reason, and a clue or riddle must be hidden somewhere. He kept walking.

“Yo, where you going?” Paul called out.

Tick turned to look, surprised at how far he’d walked—at least a hundred feet. “I don’t know!” he yelled. “Trying to find a clue!”

He stopped, squinting to examine the endless tube as it stretched into the horizon, diminishing in a shimmering haze of heat in the distance. Nothing appeared to break the consistency of the smooth glass—no ladders, no doors, no connected buildings. He finally gave up and walked back to his friends, both of whom were digging in the sand.

“See anything?” he asked.

“No,” Sofia answered. She sat back on her heels, letting out a big sigh. “Seems like a perfect cylinder. A really big one.”

Before he could reply, a deep humming sound filled the air, a short burst

lasting only a few seconds, but so loud it made the glass vibrate. *Or maybe it was the other way around*, Tick thought. Maybe the glass had shaken and *made* the sound.

Sofia and Paul jumped to their feet and moved next to Tick.

“Please tell me you guys heard that,” Paul said.

“Yeah,” Tick said, almost in a whisper. He thought he might’ve seen something from the corner of his eye—a slight movement in the glass to their left. “Something happened when it made that sound—I didn’t really get a good look.” He pointed to where he thought he’d seen the anomaly and walked closer; the others joined him.

“What do you mean?” Sofia asked.

“I don’t know. I thought I saw something move across the glass, a shadow inside or water pouring down it.”

Paul reached out and ran his hand along the curved wall. “Serious?”

“Yeah, positive.”

“Let’s wait to see if it happens again,” Sofia said.

Tick folded his arms, staring at the tube. No one said a word, silently hoping for a clue as to what they should do next.

A minute went by. Then another. Then several. A half-hour passed and nothing happened. Tick felt so uncomfortable from the sweat drenching his clothes and the sticky salt on his face and the burning in his skin and the sand in his shoes—

VRRMMMMM!

The sound boomed out again for five or six seconds, and this time, they all saw it. Right where Paul had touched earlier, a section of glass slid down, as if it were simply melting open, creating a rectangular hole the size of a typical door. Inside, filling the entire cylinder, something huge and dark zoomed past like a train, going at an incredible speed. Tick couldn’t see any details, scarcely believing that whatever it was could move at such a velocity.

The train thing was gone as soon as it had come, and the glass melted upward, closing the door and reforming until not a single blemish or mark revealed it had ever been there.

“Whoa,” Paul said.

“This must be a tunnel for some kind of bullet train,” Sofia said. She gingerly reached out to where the doorway had appeared, then tapped the glass with her fingertip and pulled away. “It’s not any hotter than the rest of the tube.”

“We’re obviously supposed to go inside,” Tick said.

“And get smashed by that thing?” Paul said. “Wasn’t much room for a nice stroll in there if that train comes flying by again.”

Sofia turned toward the two of them so they stood in a small circle, facing each other. “Tick’s right. It can’t be a coincidence that we showed up here next to this big tunnel, right where a door opens up. We have to go inside.”

Paul shook his head. “Well, I’m not too keen on the idea of getting run over by a monster train. That door seems to open only every half-hour or so and it only stayed open a few seconds. Jumping in there sounds like the worst idea I’ve ever heard.”

“There has to be a path and a railing, right?” Tick said. “Even if it’s small. Any subway in the world has a walkway, doesn’t it? For people to make repairs and stuff?”

Paul shrugged. “Maybe, but it sure seemed to me like that thing was right next to the glass.”

“Yeah, it was,” Sofia agreed. “But what else are we going to do? Sit out here in the sun and bake to death? There’s no sign of anything for miles and miles except that stupid chair—I guess we could try sitting on it again, but—”

“We have to go in *there*,” Tick interrupted, nodding toward the tube, knowing he was right.

Paul held out his hands in surrender. “All right, all right, all right. Look, here’s what we’ll do. We sit here and wait for the door to open again. When it does, we’ll peek in and see what we see—all while making sure we don’t let anything slice our heads off or smash our faces in. Ya know, just for kicks. Like I’ve said before, we wouldn’t want to mess up this pretty face of mine or you *know* the ladies would be devastated.”

Sofia groaned.

“That works for me,” Tick said. “If this door opens every half-hour or whatever, we don’t need to rush it. Next time, let’s just lean in real quick and take a look around. Hopefully there’ll be a walkway with a railing. If not, we’ll decide what to do from there.”

“Deal,” Paul said.

“Who’s going to poke their head in?” Sofia asked.

“All of us—it looks big enough,” Tick said. “Sofia, you look left. Paul, you look straight ahead. I’ll look to the right—and make sure you look *down*, too. Get in line and let’s get ready. Who knows when it’ll open next.”

They lined up in the order Tick had indicated and stood just inches from the invisible door in the shiny curved glass. The seconds dragged into minutes as Tick stared at his distorted reflection, trying to stay focused so he could lean forward the instant things changed. The sun had moved further west, but it still shone down with ruthless heat.

“What if the door closes before we pull out?” Paul said after what seemed like an hour of waiting.

Tick rolled his shoulders, surprised at how stiff his muscles were, tensed as

he kept himself prepared to move. His injuries from the metaspides still stung as well. “Just count to three inside your head then pull back. It stayed open at least—”

The humming sound cut him off.

Tick tried not to blink as he stared at the unbelievable sight of the doorway opening. Like liquid silver, the glass melted and disappeared into itself, dropping in a straight line until a perfect rectangle once again revealed the inside of the tube.

“Now!” Tick said, but the other two were already leaning forward with him.

Everything felt different—the *vrrmmmm* sound wasn’t as loud and nothing shook. Even as Tick’s head passed through the opening, he could see that no train or anything else was close by. Mentally counting to three, he stared across the tube and took it all in, hoping his friends were doing the same.



He saw no sign of rails or anything else to indicate train tracks. There wasn't even a sunken floor running along the bottom. The inside of the

structure looked much like the outside, a long tunnel of smooth glass almost completely unblemished by objects. It was much darker inside, the sunlight filtering into dark shades of blue and purple as it passed through. Here and there, small, odd-shaped formations of glass jutted into the tunnel. Tick had no idea what they were for.

Tick felt someone tugging on his shirt. He snapped back to his senses and jerked himself out of the tube. A second later, the humming sound returned as the glass magically formed upward, a gravity-defying sheet of molten crystal, and sealed off the doorway.

“Dang, Tick!” Paul said. “Weren’t you the one who said count to *three*?”

“Sorry—I just . . . I guess I lost track of time.”

“How do you lose track of three seconds?” Sofia said.

“Yeah, man—one more second and you’d have been running around here without a head.”

Tick ignored them, still fascinated by the inside of the tunnel. “So what did you guys see?”

“Glass,” Paul said. “A bunch of glass.”

“Me, too,” Sofia agreed.

Tick frowned, having hoped they would have seen something different. “No sign of a walkway or anything?”

Paul shook his head. “Just smooth glass with little things sticking out here and there—no idea what those were.”

Sofia nodded. “Below us the glass just curved toward the bottom in the middle then started back up again. It’s just a big glass tunnel. That’s it.”

Tick folded his arms and leaned back against the tube—a few feet away from the doorway, just in case. “What was that thing we saw zing past last time?” He wondered if maybe they’d gone to a Reality with extremely advanced technology, some form of travel they couldn’t even comprehend.

Sofia seemed to be on the same wavelength. “Maybe it’s some kind of futuristic invention—a train that slides through the tube at lightning speeds. Maybe this is a special kind of glass mixed with a metal we don’t know about and super-magnetized. Maybe.”

“Man, that sounded smart,” Paul said as he joined Tick, leaning against the tube.

Sofia put her hands on her hips and stared at them, as if picking out a criminal from a police lineup. “Okay, so what do we do?”

A long pause answered her. Tick finally broke the silence. “We go in.”

“Now, wait a minute—” Paul began.

“He’s right, Paul,” Sofia said. “What else can we do? We go in and let the door close behind us. Someone is testing our bravery. If we’re willing to just

stand out here and roast to death, what good are we as Realitants?”

“What good are we if we get smashed by a big old train?” Paul retorted.

“Courage,” Sofia said. “Master George expects us to be brave.”

“He also expects us to be smart.”

“How about this?” Tick interjected. He stepped away from the tube. “We’ll wait until the door opens *and* we don’t feel the big vibration of the train-thing. The door opens every half-hour, but maybe the train only comes by at certain intervals. We’ve been here for at least three hours and we’ve only felt the vibration of the train twice.”

“I’m in,” Sofia said quickly.

They both looked at Paul, who took a long moment to think. “Fine—but only if there’s no doubt the train isn’t coming.”

“Sweet,” Tick said. “Line up again.”

They did, and time seemed to move slower than ever. When the door opened next, it was accompanied by the violent vibration of the traveling machine. Tick caught a blurry glimpse of the dark shape as it zipped past.

“See,” Sofia said. “It’s totally obvious when the train is coming. We can probably go in next time. If we don’t see or find anything in thirty minutes, we’ll just come back out.”

Again, the waiting game. Tick felt like the heat and the boredom were slowly driving his mind crazy; his stomach ached for food. He thought of his family, picturing each one in turn. Kayla, finally reading and loving every minute of it. Lisa, getting better at the piano and yapping on the phone constantly. His mom, the best cook he’d ever known—though old Aunt Mabel in Alaska was a close second. Finally, he pictured his dad: big belly, funny hair, gigantic smashed nose and all. Thinking of them made him feel a little better, but his heart panged with sadness as well.

What if this time, he didn’t make it back to them?

His attention came back to the hot desert and big tube when he heard the humming sound again, this time much quieter with no vibrations. The glass doorway melted open, and no one said a word. Together, the three of them jumped through the hole and into the tunnel.

As they slid to the curved bottom of the huge cylinder, Tick heard the swishing sound of the door closing shut behind them.

Streams of Fire

Tick was surprised at how the glass felt on the inside—cool, but hard as steel. The light came from everywhere and nowhere at once, a muted glow that made Paul and Sofia’s skin look purple. Glimmering shapes skittered along the interior surface of the tunnel, like reflections from a swimming pool. As Tick stood, he thought he might slip on the shiny surface, but the material had plenty of friction—it was almost sticky.

“What’s that smell?” Paul said, taking a big sniff with a wrinkled nose.

Tick took a deep breath. “Ooh, that does stink.” The air smelled like the chemicals in a portable toilet.

Tick walked as far as he could up the curved side of the tunnel, almost making it to the part where it was completely vertical. He saw a round bubble of glass, about three inches tall, bulging out from the wall. Scared to touch it, he leaned forward and took a closer look. A freaky distortion of his own image stared back at him, but nothing else.

“You’re gonna break your neck,” Sofia said. “Come back down, and let’s figure out what we need to do.”

Tick scooted down on his rear end, then stood back up. “Maybe we should just start walking.”

“Which way?” Sofia asked.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Paul said. “It was a borderline eight on the dumb-guy scale to come in here in the first place. If we start trottin’ off away from this door, we’d be complete idiots. Did you forget about that really big train that goes really fast?”

“Maybe we could stand to the side and jump onto it when it flies by,” Tick suggested.

Paul and Sofia both looked at him with blank faces. Then Paul said, “Dude, you just hit number one on the Top Ten List of Dumbest Ideas Ever Spoken Aloud.”

Tick shrugged. “Maybe. Got any better ideas?”

“Yeah, let’s stand here and hope Santa Claus shows up to tell us what to do.”

“Oh, would you two—” Sofia began.

“Shhh!” Tick said. He thought he’d heard something.

“What?”

“Just be quiet for a sec.” He stilled his body, perked his ears. There it was. A very quiet beeping sound, like a car alarm honking from miles away. “Do

you hear that?”

“No,” Paul answered.

“Yeah, I hear it,” Sofia said. “Sounds like it’s far away but I can’t tell from which direction.” She looked down one end of the tunnel, then turned to the other. “That way?”

Tick shook his head, still straining his ears. “No, it sounds like it’s coming from outside the tunnel. Or below us, maybe.”

“Do you people have Superman hearing or something?” Paul said, throwing his arms up in frustration. “I don’t hear a dang—hey, what’s that?” He pointed toward the ceiling.

Tick followed the line of direction, at first not seeing what Paul was pointing toward. Then he spotted it—a blinking red light.

“That looks like a button,” Sofia said.

Tick squinted to get a better look and agreed. “It’s definitely a button. With some words next to it, on a sticker.” The ceiling was about twenty feet above them, just far enough that Tick couldn’t make out the words.

“If you can read that, you *are* Superman,” Paul said.

“I can’t. But I bet we’re supposed to push that button.”

“You think?” Paul frowned. “Master George built this entire gigantic tube thing just to test us to see if we could push a button?”

“I don’t know,” Tick muttered, feeling confused and discouraged.

After a long pause, all of them staring up at the flashing button, Sofia spoke up. “Maybe if we stood on each other’s shoulders, we could reach it.”

“On each *other*’s shoulders?” Paul asked. “What does that mean?”

“Well . . . you’re probably the strongest, though that isn’t saying much.” She looked Tick up and down, weighing him with her eyes. “I’ll get on Tick’s shoulders, then you lift both of us up.”

Paul flexed his arms, showing off his not-so-impressive biceps. “I might have some guns, Miss Italy, but that sounds ridiculous.”

“Let’s just try it,” Tick urged. “Show us you’re a man.”

Paul laughed. “You two are crazy. But whatever, I’m game.”

Tick got down on his knees and let Sofia crawl onto his shoulders, wrapping her legs around his neck so that her feet dangled over his chest. As Paul helped him stand up, Tick thought the blood vessels in his brain might burst from the effort. He couldn’t help but groan out loud as he struggled to balance with Sofia on top of him. He opened his mouth to say something, but Paul held a finger to his lips.

“Don’t say anything,” he said. “Nothing. No matter what you say, you’d be calling her fat. So just zip it.”

“You’re not so dumb, after all,” Sofia said from above.

Tick braced his feet and finally steadied himself. “How in the world are you going to lift both of us?”

“I surf, man. My legs could lift an elephant.” He looked up at Sofia. “Not that I’m saying you weigh as much as an—”

“Just get on with it,” Sofia said, kicking out at Paul.

Paul smiled at Tick, then walked behind him. “All right, dude. Let’s do this thing.”

Tick shuffled his feet apart and soon felt Paul grabbing him by the thighs and lifting with his shoulders. To his complete amazement, he rose slowly into the air.

Paul screamed out words as he struggled to stand. “Good . . . gracious . . . mercy . . . mama . . . you people . . . are *FAT!*”

The three of them swayed slightly as Paul fought to keep his balance and strength. Tick’s stomach turned; he couldn’t believe what was happening. *I’ve been zapped into a Saturday morning cartoon.*

“I can’t reach it!” Sofia yelled from above. “I’d have to *stand* on Tick’s shoulders!”

“Then *do it!*” Paul screamed from below. “Hurry!”

Sofia lifted her right foot and wedged it between Tick’s neck and shoulder, grabbing his head with both hands and pulling his hair.

“Ow!” he yelled.

Sofia ignored him and tried pushing down and lifting her other leg up to his left shoulder. That’s when everything came apart and they fell on the ground in a chaotic heap of arms and legs.

After they’d finally squirmed away from the pile and stood again, the three of them stared at each other, panting with red faces.

“You’re right,” Tick said between breaths. “That was ridiculous.”

“I don’t think my body will ever heal,” Paul said through a wince.

Sofia stared up at the button with a grin. “Well, at least I got a closer look at the words on that sticker.”

“Really?” Tick asked, his hope rising. “What did it say?”

Sofia let out a discouraged sigh. “Two words: *Push me.*”

Sato lay on his back, staring at the ceiling. He’d focused so long on a bear-shaped shadow caused by the pale moonlight seeping through his window that it seemed to be moving, growing smaller and larger as if breathing. He knew it was only a trick of his eyes, but it still gave him the creeps.

He’d dreaded going to sleep lately because of an old dream that had come back to haunt him. He had no idea why it had returned in recent days, causing

him to jerk awake every night, a sheen of sweat covering his whole body. Actually, it wasn't a dream at all—it was a memory.

The memory of his parents' murder.

What a day that had been, almost eight years ago. A terrible, frightening, horrible, horrible day. Master George had been there. Mistress Jane had been there, too. Others as well, but for some reason he couldn't remember their faces. But he'd never forget the way the old man had looked that day, or his closest ally—the woman dressed in yellow. He'd never forget. Sato would never, ever forget.

He closed his eyes, knowing the dream would come but giving in to exhaustion, hoping the memory might strengthen his hopes for revenge. Revenge on Mistress Jane.

Revenge . . .

"Yama Kun, come meet our guests!" his mother called from downstairs. She'd always called him that. It meant Little Mountain.

Six-year-old Sato stepped out of his room and slowly walked down the stairs, not wanting to meet a bunch of strangers. While preparing for the big dinner, his father had called them "Realitants" as if any person in the world should know what that meant.

Realitants. A strange word, especially for a six-year-old. But after witnessing what Sato saw that night, the word burned a place in his mind, never to be lost. Realitants. In years to come, he'd end up thinking the word every day, sometimes repeating it aloud as he looked in the mirror. Realitants. The word came to mean evil and death to him, and he made a pact to one day rid the world of them.

He'd known so little back then.

He entered the front room, where several people sat on the leather couches and fancy armchairs, sipping ocha tea and speaking with each other as if discussing the weather or the latest sumo tournament. Most of them were unrecognizable, their faces a blur. The only ones he saw clearly were the slightly chubby man in the suit—Master George—and the beautiful but chilling bald woman, Mistress Jane. They sat together on the couch, mumbling something he couldn't quite hear.

It was the image of those two sitting side by side on the couch that stayed in his memory more than anything else. It was that image that many years later would make him distrust Master George with a passion. At least for a time.

Without warning, the room grew silent, and everyone turned to look at Sato.

"I'd like you all to meet my son," his father said, gripping Sato's shoulders from behind and squeezing. His mother joined them, pulling Sato's hand into

hers.

The dream froze for a moment, as if paused on television. It always did at this exact point, and Sato knew why. Although he was nervous at meeting strangers, uncomfortable in his nice clothes, perhaps even hungry at the time, it would be the last time Sato ever felt the comforting touch of his parents. The last time he ever felt safe and protected.

That moment with his parents would be the last time Sato ever felt happy. The dream continued playing out.

Mistress Jane stood, then Master George and the rest. Each of them stepped forward around the great, round coffee table and shook Sato's little hand. George knelt on the ground, a big smile creasing his face.

"Goodness gracious me," the old man said. "I can see it in the boy's eyes. The passion, the hunger, the intelligence. A splendid Realitant he'll make, Master Sato"—he looked up at Sato's father—"a splendid Realitant, indeed. We'll begin the testing shortly."

Mistress Jane was next, also kneeling before Yama Kun. Though her smile shone and her face was pretty, even then, Sato felt that something was wrong with her.

"Yes," she said. Sato almost expected her to cackle like an evil old witch. "A smart child by the looks of it." She leaned forward to whisper in Sato's ear, so quiet only he could hear her. "But whose side will you fight for? Everything is about to change, little boy."

Mistress Jane stood. "This is as good a time as any," she announced, turning slowly as she spoke so everyone could see her face. "My team has discovered a new Reality—a stable one. It's solid enough to officially call it a branch."

"Really?" George shouted. "That's delightful, simply delightful!"

Jane looked down at Sato, who returned her glare. She rolled her eyes and stuck out her tongue, as if disgusted by George's enthusiasm.

"The Thirteenth Reality," she continued, not taking her eyes off Sato, "has . . . unusual qualities. We've explored it extensively, realized its potential."

"Why didn't you tell us before?" Sato's father asked, his voice laced with anger. "If you've been exploring it this long—"

"The Chi'karda there," Jane said, ignoring the interruption, "is different. More powerful. More potent. It's mutated into something quite extraordinary. We may finally have the secret to finding our Utopian Reality. If this place isn't it, the power in the Thirteenth will help us make it ourselves."

No one spoke for a long time; a few people exchanged nervous glances.

"Why all the sad faces?" Jane asked. "Haven't you trusted me all these years? Don't you still trust me?"

“Not if you break the rules,” Sato’s mother said. “How can we trust you if you break the rules and hide things from us?”

“This calls for an immediate Discretionary Council,” Sato’s father said. “George, you know it does. I demand you call in the Haunce, this instant.”

George stood. “Now, Master Sato, let’s not be hasty—”

That was the line. Those seven words would stick in young Sato’s mind, making it even harder for him to trust the man in the future, when his own recruiting call came. That was the line, because after George said it, not another word was spoken by him before Sato’s parents were dead.

“I don’t have time for this,” Jane said. “I thought this might be the reaction, so I brought along something to show you all how important this discovery is. For all of us. For the Realities. For humanity.”

“Stop,” Sato’s father said. “Stop this instant. I demand it.”

“You . . . demand it?” she replied, her lip curled ever so slightly. “You demand it?”

“Yes,” Sato’s mother answered for her husband. “You’re scaring us. This doesn’t feel right.”

Mistress Jane smiled then, an image Sato would never forget. The smile held no humor, no joy, no kindness. It was an evil smile.

The next moment, the windows erupted, blowing inward with a shower of tinkling glass shards. Shouts of pain surrounded him as streams of fire poured in from outside, streaking spurts of lava that whisked around the room like flying eels of flame.

The dream always grew dim at that moment, the memory fading into horror. He remembered his father’s comforting grip on his shoulders disappearing, his mother’s hand letting go of his own. He remembered intense heat. He remembered people running around, their clothes on fire. He remembered Jane vanishing into thin air. He remembered crying, turning to find his parents, wanting to run away.

But then, like always, he saw one last thing in the dream before it ended. One last image that would haunt him forever. His mother and father, lying on the ground, side by side.

Screaming. Burning.

Dying.

Sato woke up.

A Very Scary Proposition

Okay, it's my turn," Sofia said as she took off her right tennis shoe. "You guys couldn't poke yourselves in your own eyeball."

Tick wanted to argue, but didn't have much evidence to the contrary. He and Paul had been trying to hit the button with a shoe for at least ten minutes, their only reward being smacked in the head a couple of times as the shoes fell back down.

"Poke yourselves in your own eyeball?" Paul said. "Never heard that one before."

Sofia ignored him, planting her feet and staring up at the button with intense concentration, swinging the shoe up and down with both hands as she readied herself. Finally, she swung hard upward and let the shoe fly. It missed by three feet.

Paul snickered. "Ooh, so close. Hate to break it to you, but you throw like a girl."

Uh-oh, Tick thought.

Sofia bent down to pick up her shoe, then bounced it up and down in her right hand like a baseball. "What did you say?"

Paul folded his arms. "I said, you throw like a girl."

"Huh," Sofia grunted, staring down at her shoe. Then she reared back and threw it straight for Paul's face, smacking him square on the nose.

He grabbed his face with both hands, jumping up and down. "That hurt, man!" he shouted. But a second later, he started laughing. "Ah, Tick, it was worth it to see Miss Italy mad. Her face looks like her daddy's spaghetti sauce."

This time Sofia punched Paul in the arm with a loud thump. "You want some more?" she asked.

Paul rubbed the spot. "Dang, woman, I give up. How'd you get so mean, anyway?"

Tick was loving every minute of the exchange, but he knew they had to push that button. He felt something—a pressure in his chest—that told him they'd better get serious quick.

"You lovebirds cut it out," he said. "Start throwing."

They tried for another five minutes, dodging each other's shoes and scrambling around to pick up their own. Sofia finally hit the bull's-eye.

When her shoe connected, a quiet click echoed off the round glass of the tunnel and the blinking light stopped, turning off completely. All three of

them stared, waiting for something amazing to happen. Nothing did. Tick rubbed his sunburned neck, sore from craning it upward for so long.

“Great,” he said. “Just great.”

Sofia huffed and looked down; Tick noticed her body tense, her eyes widen. She stared at the floor, transfixed, as if hypnotized. Tick quickly followed her gaze. He couldn’t stop the gasp before it escaped his mouth.

On the very bottom of the tunnel, at their feet, a perfect red square had formed on the glass, about five feet on each side, as if a neon light were glowing right beneath them. In the middle of that square, several lines of words appeared like text on a computer screen, black on white.

“Guess we *were* supposed to push the button,” Paul said.

Tick fell to his knees and scooted around until the words were right side up. It was another poem—a pretty long one. He started reading.

You pushed the button; it called the beast.

It moves real fast; it likes to feast.

You can stop it once, but cannot twice,

It’s the only way to save your life.

How to do it, you may ask;

This will not be an easy task.

Your mind will beg of you to quit,

But if you do, your mind will split.

On this very spot you’ll stand;

You will die if I see you’ve ran.

I’m testing strength and will and trust.

Move one inch, and die you must.

Do not step outside the square.

No matter what—don’t you dare.

When this is over, you will see

A grand reward for trusting me.

“Dude,” Paul breathed. “There’s no way Master George is behind all this.”

Sofia sat down next to the poem. “For the first time in my life, I think I agree with you. He said in the letter we were going to a gathering, not do more tests.”

Tick read through the poem again, feeling very uneasy. Paul and Sofia were right—this was getting weird. Even though Master George had sent the Gnat Rat and the Tingle Wraith after them during their initial recruiting test, this seemed too sinister for the jolly old man. It felt dark and threatening.

“This isn’t even a riddle,” Tick said, standing up.

“What do you mean?” Sofia asked.

Tick pointed down the long tunnel in the direction from which he thought the train thing had come the first time they’d seen it blur past. “There’s nothing to solve. We have to stand inside this square no matter what happens. No matter what . . . *comes*.”

He couldn’t get over the sick feeling in his gut. Something felt wrong, like he’d left a fat wallet full of money on a city park bench. Or probably how his mom would feel if she realized she’d left the oven on, right after taking off in the airplane to go visit Grandma. The world seemed twisted, off balance.

After a long pause, Sofia spoke up in a confident voice. “It doesn’t matter.”

“What doesn’t matter?” Tick and Paul said at the same time.

Sofia shrugged. “If it’s Master George—which I doubt—we need to do what the poem says. If it’s not him, we *still* need to do what it says. We’ll be really tempted to leave the square, but we can’t. Then, at the last second, whoever it is will wink us away. Poof, nice and easy—just like the chair thing.”

“How do we know for sure we’ll get winked?” Tick asked, even though the answer had just clicked in his head.

“If somebody else is doing this,” Sofia said, “they could obviously just kill us if they wanted to. Why would they go through this whole ordeal to get rid of us? If anything, now we have even more pressure to pass these tests.” She shook her fists and screamed in frustration. “This is so stupid! Stupid, stupid, stupid!”

“Way to sum it up intelligently,” Paul muttered. When she gave him a cold stare, he threw his hands up. “Hey, I agree with you!”

“Wait,” Tick said, shushing them, holding a hand out. He felt a slight tremor beneath his feet, a small vibration with no sound.

“It’s coming, dude,” Paul said. “It’s coming!”

The shaking grew stronger, almost visible now; Paul and Sofia seemed to jiggle up and down. Tick had never been in an earthquake, but he knew this must be what it felt like.

“What do we do, man, what do we do?” Paul was looking left and right as if trying to decide which direction to run.

Sofia reached out and grabbed Paul by the shirt, jerking him toward her until their faces were only inches apart. “We stand in this square, Rogers, you hear me? We stand in this square!”

At once, they all looked down at their feet. Tick had to shuffle a foot closer to the others to be inside the red-lined boundary.

“She’s right,” he said as Sofia let go of Paul. “No matter what, we have to stay in the square.”

The tunnel trembled violently; Tick had to spread his feet a little and hold out his arms to maintain his balance. A sound grew in the distance, a low rumble of thunder. Whatever it was—the poem had called it a beast—was coming from the direction Tick had thought it would. He narrowed his eyes and stared that way, though nothing had appeared yet in the distance.

“This is crazy, man,” Paul said. “Are you guys *sure* about this?”

“Yes,” Tick said, not breaking his concentration. He thought he could see something dark, far down the tunnel.

“My brain wants me to run,” Paul insisted.

This time, Tick did turn, pointing at the poem still printed on the ground. “The message said we’d think that. Don’t move.” He looked back down the tunnel. There was definitely something dark way down there, growing larger, bit by bit.

“I’m watching you, Rogers,” Sofia said, almost shouting as the rumbling and shaking increased. “We’re going to wink away. No one’s going to kill us!”

“Fine! Quit treating me like a baby.”

Tick strained his eyes as the dark shape grew bigger. Something about its movement made him think it was *twisting*—corkscrewing through the tunnel like a roller coaster.

“What *is* that thing?” he said, though the roar had grown so loud he knew no one could hear him. He braced himself, knowing it would be easier if he didn’t look, didn’t see it coming. But his curiosity was too strong.

Then the air around them suddenly brightened, flashing a blinding white.

“Look!” Paul shouted from behind him.

Tick turned to see sand dunes and sunlight through a gaping hole in the side of the tunnel.

The door had opened.

The Train Thing

A shot of elation and relief surged through Tick's nerves, like he'd been rescued from a burning building. There it was, their escape! He even took a step toward it before reason pulled his thoughts back to reality. Sofia grabbed his arm.

"No!" she screamed.

"I know!" he answered, looking down at his feet. His toes were within inches of the red line. The world around them shook and roared, as if they were in a small building pummeled by a tornado. The wind had picked up, rustling their hair and clothes.

Paul stared at the open door, his eyes glazed over.

"Don't even think about it!" Sofia shouted at him. "No matter what, remember? If we run, we die!"

Paul snapped out of his daze, looked at Tick. "Dude, it's right there!"

"Whoever it is, they're just tempting us!" Tick yelled.

He moved as close to Paul as he could, then pulled Sofia in. "Link arms!" He could barely hear his own voice.

Sofia obeyed immediately, but Paul hesitated, the wind ripping at his shirt.

"Do it!" Tick yelled.

Paul's face sank into a frown as he wrapped his arm around Sofia's elbow, then his other around Tick's. All this time, the door remained open, staying open far longer than it ever had before. *This was all planned out*, Tick thought. *But by who?*

From the way they stood, only Sofia faced the onrushing nightmare, her face set in cold fear, eyes wide, mouth in a tight line. The air swirled around them, making them sway dangerously close to the line. Tick thought Sofia's hair might simply fly off at any second. And the noise. The *noise*. Like screaming brakes and revved jet engines and pounding hammers and hissing steam—a chorus of terrible sounds that pierced Tick's ears with sharp pain.

Finally, as if giving in to some inevitable fate, he twisted his neck to look behind him.

The thing was very close now, dark and hideous, spinning upside down and right side up again, corkscrewing as it sped toward them, faster and faster. Tick squinted, thinking the panic must have scrambled his brain—what he was looking at didn't make any sense.

The poem had been more accurate than he'd thought. The train was not a train at all. It wasn't a car, truck, or plane. It wasn't even a spaceship. The

thing thundering toward them at unbelievable speeds was an *animal*. The biggest, strangest, ugliest beast Tick had ever seen.

“What . . .” he said, trailing off, knowing his friends couldn’t hear him. Nothing made sense anymore. Nothing.

As the beast got closer, Tick felt the fear in him swell, burning like fire, surging through his veins, hurting him. The animal had at least a dozen sets of thick, muscled legs, almost a blur as they churned back and forth to move the creature in its twisting pattern. Its huge head spun but, impossibly, didn’t turn as quickly as the rest of its body, as if the legs were on springs or gears. Dark, scaly skin covered a hideous head, spikes and stunted bones sticking out in random places, enormous teeth jutting from its mouth.

As it approached within a half-mile, then a quarter-mile, Tick felt more scared than ever before, despite the things he’d been through. His mind couldn’t come up with any possible explanation why a gigantic glass tube would exist in the middle of the desert, made for a terrible beast to run through at ridiculous speeds. Confusion and fear mingled together inside his brain, squeezing his thoughts until his head pounded with a drumming pain.

Wink us away, he thought. *Time’s almost up, wink us away. Wink us away. WINK US AWAY!* The wind, the noise—the horrible noise. *What is making that stupid noise?* He thought he heard a scream, maybe two. Maybe it was him.

When the beast was only fifty feet away, growling and snapping its jaws and twisting and pumping its powerful legs, bulleting toward them, everything went crazy.

For the slightest of moments, a hush swallowed the area, the noise ending in an abrupt clap of empty silence. Then a booming, deep toll, like millions of huge bells and French horns playing at once, rang out, drowning out all other sound. Tick let go of Paul and Sofia and clapped his hands over his ears. The volume became unbearable; the ache in his head became a splitting pain behind his eyes.

The entire tunnel rocked upward and crashed back to the ground, sending a web of cracks shooting in all directions, spreading like a branching tree with the sound of ice breaking over a frozen lake. Tick crashed to the ground, his knees buckling from the impact; Paul fell on top of him, then Sofia.

Somehow Tick got out the words, “Stay in the box!”

In both directions, the tunnel started *warping*—impossible waves rippling in the glass up and down its length. The massive beast had stopped a few feet away, its many legs coming to a rest on the bottom of the tube. Its head swiveled around at the chaos as if it were as frightened as the humans. The deep, vibrating horn-like sound continued to boom through the air.

Tick and the others scrambled to the center of the square and clasped arms

around each other, huddled on top of the still-glowing words of the poem. Everything shook, much worse than before. The glass rippled and cracked; the tunnel bounced in places like a writhing worm. The beast let out a roar, its huge mouth opening to show dozens of teeth; saliva flew everywhere. Still, the sound of it was nothing compared to the clanging, ear-piercing toll of the mysterious bells.

“What’s happening?” Sofia shouted. Tick barely heard her and had no answer.

The creature moved toward them, anger ignited in its black eyes that looked through a hooded brow of horns and scales. Almost on top of them, it roared again, this time louder. The air reeked of something foul and rotten.

“Stay in the box!” Tick shouted again. *Wink us away. Wink us away. WINK US AWAY!*

The beast lunged at them, its legs catapulting it into the air. Its outermost horn came within inches of Tick’s face when something suddenly slammed the whole creature away from them and against the wall of the tunnel to their right, where the door still stood open—though it was way too small for the beast. The glass exploded outward, the huge animal crashing through and into a steep desert dune.

As it landed, sending up a massive spray of sand, large sections of the tunnel began melting into liquid, forming huge flying globs that looked like molten silver as they moved through the air. More and more of them appeared, completely destroying the tunnel except for the small spot on which Tick and the others stood. All at once, the melted glass hurtled toward the monster, engulfing the beast completely. The liquid hardened back into glass, tinkling and crackling.

As quickly as it had started, everything stopped. Tick sat next to Paul and Sofia, all of them squeezing each other, gasping to catch their breath. Only a few dozen feet away stood a horrific sculpture of glass, twisted and bent, parts of the poor animal’s body sticking out here and there. One large horn jutted from the front, pointing at them as if it had all been their fault.

No one said a word. They had stayed in the square. They had done what they were supposed to, despite everything.

A few seconds later, someone winked them away to another Reality.

An Invitation

Mistress Jane walked through the darkening woods, enjoying the smells of the forest and fresh air more than she thought she would. She'd rarely ventured out of the Lemon Fortress since losing her Barrier Wand to the Realitants, too busy working and planning. Too busy thinking.

A bird cawed in the distance, a shriek that sounded like someone being tortured. She faltered a moment, then stepped over a log and continued walking. *There you go again*, she thought. *You can take anything and see the worst in it.* Why couldn't she just hear the sound of a bird and appreciate the beauty in it—the joy of nature? When had she become so dark and morbid? How had it gotten this bad?

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, loving the strong scent of pine. Such simple things used to please her, make her happy. Until her mission to find the Utopian Reality consumed her and turned her into what she'd become. Someone feared and hated. When it came down to it, Jane didn't like herself very much. Not one bit.

She reached a sudden break in the trees, the place Frazier had described to her. He'd wanted to come with her, insisted on it with more bravery than usual. Jane had finally ordered him to clean the kitchens for being obstinate. If anyone could take care of themselves in the Thirteenth Reality, it was Mistress Jane.

The sun had fallen behind the line of trees on the other side of the huge clearing, a random twinkle shining through the leaves as she kept walking. She'd believed Frazier's report, but she still felt a thrill of shock at seeing it for herself.

The gap in the forest was at least a quarter-mile in diameter, almost perfectly circular. She saw no signs or tracks of heavy machinery that had mowed down hundreds of trees overnight. She saw only a few footprints, and they looked to be those of the hunters and Frazier's investigating party.

Who did this? And how?

As she neared the center of the clearing, she tried to come up with possibilities. It certainly wasn't a natural phenomenon—especially considering the felled tree trunks spelled out words in massive letters. From this low vantage point, she couldn't make out the words, of course, only a general sense of the individual letters—even though they were almost too big to recognize. But she had no doubt as to what it said, trusting Frazier implicitly.

Mistress Jane, you are a coward. Come and find me.

She continued on, knowing exactly where she wanted to end up. The message had a hidden meaning, a literal clue. *Come and find me.* That's exactly what she was doing, counting on her budding powers to help her if she ran into any trouble.

She made it to the other side of the clearing, her arms and legs weary from crossing over—and sometimes *climbing* over—the many logs. She could have levitated herself, flown to her destination without another thought, but she was enjoying the nostalgic effort of physical exertion. Finally, in the center of where she estimated the word “me” was spelled out, she stopped.

“Here I am,” she said, not stooping so low as to shout; she had her dignity to preserve. “We’re near enough to the old battleground and its thick Chi’karda. Wink in and be done with it.”

A few minutes passed in silence. Jane grew restless far quicker than she expected, and stilled herself to be sure her emotions didn’t show. She would not utter another word or move another muscle, no matter how long the mystery person made her wait.

Ten more minutes went by, the cloudless sky growing ever darker, a deep blue slowly bleeding to purple. Then, with no fanfare or smoke, a man appeared ten feet in front of her. Dressed in a pinstripe suit, he had dark hair and olive skin. He was tall and almost handsome, but not quite. His arms were clasped behind his back, perhaps holding something, hiding it from her. Though she’d never met him, she knew his name immediately. After all, just a few months ago she’d tried unsuccessfully to arrange a meeting with him.

Reginald Chu, perhaps the most dangerous man in the Realities.

But surely he couldn’t possibly know her powers in the Chi’karda were growing enough to match his technological gadgetry. *Why is he here?*

“Hello, *Mistress Jane*,” Chu said, mocking her title. “We finally meet, several months later than you had hoped.”

“You got my note, then?” she asked.

“I did.” He paused, not moving, staring at her. “I waited for you in the park, but you never showed up. You wasted time that was not yours to waste.”

It took every ounce of willpower for Jane to remain calm, to not lash out and whip this man with one of the fallen logs. She could do it, and the man spoke to her as if she were inferior. *No*, she told herself. *He’s here for a reason.*

“My apologies, Mister—”

“Call me Reginald,” he snapped. “Never call me Mr. Chu. Never.”

Jane bowed her head ever so slightly. “My apologies . . . Reginald. I had a proposition for you, a good one, but the Realitants stole my Wand, trapping me here. I’ll soon have another one built.”

Chu moved his arms from behind his back to reveal what he'd been hiding—a brand new Barrier Wand, its golden surface sparkling despite the diminishing light, seven dials and switches running along its length.

He hefted the three-foot-long device in his left hand, holding it out to her as a gift. Then he dropped one end of it toward the ground and leaned on it like a cane. “I’ve had spies here since the week you stood me up. I know a lot about you. I also know about this Reality and its twisted version of Chi’karda.”

It took considerable effort for Jane not to look at the Wand, staring Chu in the face instead. “I’m glad you know how to do your research.”

“That’s not all I found. You’re missing one of the metals. It’ll be months before you can extract enough from the ore you’ve discovered.” He nodded toward the Wand at his feet. “So I’ve brought you a new Wand to save you the trouble.”

Jane folded her arms. “At what price?”

Chu broke into a smile, something Jane would never have expected to see on such a man. “I can see you’re as wise as I hoped. Nothing, of course, is free. Especially in my Reality.”

“Tales of your business skills are widespread, I assure you.” She wanted to add, *And your ruthlessness and greed are likewise well-known.*

“That’s good to know.”

She expected him to say more, but he grew silent, keeping his gaze locked with hers. *Oh, I do not like this man.* “Your price?” she asked again.

“I’ve developed something that will completely change the Realities. It’s a new invention—”

“What is it?” Jane asked, trying to assert some authority, show her impatience.

Chu paused, his face pulling tight, his eyes narrowing. “Listen to me, *Mistress*. Never interrupt me. You will stand there and listen to my proposition and you will not utter a word until I am finished. Do you understand? Indicate with a nod of your head.”

Jane felt her face fill with blood, heat up, and burn. A small sound escaped from somewhere in the back of her throat, a mortifying squeak. At that moment, she swore to herself that when this man died, he would be looking at her smiling face. The only thing staying her hand from unleashing her powers was curiosity. Intense curiosity.

She nodded.

“Good.” He pulled up the Barrier Wand and held it in front of him, parallel to the ground. “My project is called Dark Infinity, a tool that artificially creates massive amounts of Chi’karda—far stronger than anything you’ve

encountered here. It's more powerful than all of my previous accomplishments combined. However, there is still one missing piece."

Jane almost asked him what, but stopped just in time. Her curiosity burned like an itch.

"It's so strong that I can't control it alone," he continued. "I need another person, someone of proven strength, someone extraordinary. I've studied and searched every Reality, every region. I have narrowed it down to only two people. I don't fully understand yet what sets these two apart, but I do know that one of them will do. And I only need . . . one."

He paused, and Jane was dying to speak. She didn't know what she had expected, but it was certainly nothing like this.

Chu continued. "One of the two is you. Your powers here do not exist solely because of the mutated Chi'karda in this place. Otherwise, everyone would be able to do what you do. There is something extraordinary about you, and I do not say that lightly."

Who is the other? she screamed inside her head, completely ignoring the compliment.

"You might be wondering about your competition," Chu said, smiling. "And here is the proposition. It's very simple. I'm currently sending the other person through a series of tests. If he passes them and ends up where he's supposed to, he will win the honor of standing by my side as we rule the Realities. Meaning, of course, you lose and will be disposed of." He paused. "You may speak now."

"I . . . I'm not sure I completely understand," Jane mumbled, hating herself for appearing so weak. Chu had said she could be "disposed of" like a sickly fly. *How dare he?* And yet, she felt uneasy. "How do I win?"

Chu walked forward, holding out the Barrier Wand and gesturing for her to take it. She grasped the golden rod with its dials and switches eagerly, like a child grabbing for candy. It was cold and hard in her hands.

"Like I said," Chu continued, "it's very easy. If the boy makes it to me, you lose. If he doesn't, you win. Only one of you will survive in the end—only one of you will be worthy to serve with me in controlling Dark Infinity. That's it."

"That's it?" she repeated, her courage returning. "Nothing else?"

Chu nodded. "You've been given your test, and I assure you, it's not a simple task. You must kill Atticus Higginbottom."

An Elevator in Stone

Come on,” Mothball said, stopping for the tenth time to allow Rutger to catch up. “You’re slower than a sloth with no legs, you are.”

Truth be told, Mothball appreciated resting for a spell. It was blazing hot in the Arizona desert, and she was hauling a big load of logs she’d gathered from the riverside. Carried down by the Colorado River, stray wood often lodged in one particular bend, and Master George had to have his fires, didn’t he?

Rutger, sucking in every breath, his face the color of boiled cherries, stopped and craned his neck to look up at her. He was like a big ball rolling backward, pivoting on little legs. The man looked absolutely exhausted.

“Can’t . . . really run when I’m . . . carrying all of this . . . wood . . . now can I?” he managed to get out between breathing spells.

Mothball glanced at Rutger’s short arms, holding all of two sticks—one of them barely more than a twig. “Yeah, I’m quite shocked you haven’t called someone on the telly to announce you’ve broken the world’s record for stick-luggin’.”

“It probably is a record for someone from the Eleventh.” Rutger nodded toward the door hidden in the canyon crevice, about forty yards away. The two of them stood at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, its majestic red walls of stone towering over them, reaching so far to the sky they couldn’t see their tops. Having finished gathering firewood, they were making their way back to the elevator shaft entrance.

“I reckon Sofia would call you a *flimp* right about now,” Mothball said as she resumed walking toward the hidden crevice.

“It’s *wimp*, you tall sack of bones, and if she did call me that, she’d pay the price.”

“Oh, really?” Mothball called over her shoulder. “And wha’ exactly would you do? Sit on her toesies? Bite her shins, perhaps?”

“I’d do whatever it took to teach the young lady some proper manners, that’s what.”

Mothball made it to the small crack of a cave that led to the elevator and dropped her stack of logs onto the ground. She reached her arms to the sky in a long, satisfying stretch. When Rutger finally waddled over and dropped his pathetic two sticks onto the pile, he put his hands on his waist and took deep gulps of air, as if he’d just completed a marathon.

“Congratulations,” Mothball said. “You’re the first tiny fat man to haul two

twigs across a weed-scattered spit of sand. Right proud of yourself, I reckon?”

Rutger looked up at her and grinned. “Push the button, or it’ll be *your* shins that get bitten.”

Mothball’s booming laugh escaped before she could stop it. She looked around to make sure no stray hikers were around to hear it. “Quit makin’ me laugh, ya little ball of bread dough. Get us in trouble, ya will.”

She stepped through the thin crevice and pushed a button that looked like the nub of a rock. She heard the rumble of machinery and pulleys from deep within the mountain, then the low whine of the descending elevator. She groaned, having expected the doors to pop right open since they’d just exited an hour ago and no one else should’ve used it.

“Blimey, who called up the ruddy thing?” she said as she stepped out of the cave and back into the sunlight. “Probably that rascal Sally, playin’ one of ’is jokes.”

“Oh, calm yourself,” Rutger said, his face finally returning to its normal color. Sweat poured down his face, however, and his hair was matted and wet. “It only takes a couple of minutes. Master George has Sally too busy to mess with jokes anyway.”

“I’ll bet ya tonight’s dessert that when the door pops open, Sally’ll be there with a trick up his sleeve.”

Rutger looked up at her, his face creased in concern. “D-d-dessert?” he asked, as if she’d just suggested wagering the man’s life savings. “Let’s not get foolish, Mothball.”

“Then you’ll take it?” she asked, folding her arms and peering down her nose at him.

Rutger hesitated, fidgeting as he rocked back and forth on his tiny feet. “Um, no, I think you might be right on this one.” He cleared his throat. “Probably, um, going to throw a bucket of water on us. That silly lumberjack.”

Mothball shook her head, pretending to be disgusted. “You’d throw your own mum in the sewer for a dessert, you would. You can ’ave mine—s’long as you give me some of your bread and jam. Quite tasty stuff, that is.”

Rutger rubbed his chin, deep in thought. After a few seconds, he said, “No, I like the bread and jam, too. Let’s just stick with our own portions. Deal?”

Mothball reached down and patted him on the head. “You’re a good man, you are. A bit short for my likin’, but a good man indeed.”

“Oh, stop—look, it’s here.”

A few feet inside the crevice, a rock wall slid to the side, revealing the lighted cube of the elevator, its walls made of fake wood panels. Master George stood inside, dressed in his usual dark suit, arms clasped behind his back.

Mothball's surprise quickly turned to concern. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing, nothing," he said, breaking into a smile that was obviously forced. "Just wanted to come down and get a bit of fresh air."

He stepped out of the elevator and squeezed past the narrow walls of the cave and into the open canyon. He took a deep breath, then let it out in a satisfied sigh.

"Simply beautiful, don't you think?" he asked, turning back to look at them. "I really should come out here more often. Good for the heart, I'm quite sure."

Mothball rolled her eyes at Rutger. "Out with it, Master George. Somethin's botherin' ya."

Master George tried to look startled, an expression that for some reason reminded Mothball of a frightened chicken. Then his face wilted into a frown, and he huffed.

"Goodness gracious me," he said. "I can't get anything past you two."

"That's a good thing," Rutger said. "What's going on?"

Master George put his hands behind his back again and paced in a wide circle for a full minute. Mothball knew better than to interrupt him. He finally stopped and looked at both of them in turn.

"I've just read through Sato's final report of his interviews, and it concerns me greatly. He's made conclusions with which I can't disagree, and given me a proposal, in private, that frightens me to no end."

"You have our full attention," Rutger said. Mothball nodded.

Master George continued. "I've known all along that Reginald Chu was behind the strange things happening throughout some of the Realities. There've been whispers that he has a new invention, something terrible—something abominable. And I no longer have any doubt it's directly related to the people who are going insane. I'm quite sure of it."

"What is this invention?" Rutger asked.

Master George paused. "Let's go back up to the complex. I'd like Sato and Sally to join our discussion. We've much to talk about."

Mothball, troubled, bent over to pick up her large pile of logs, wet from soaking in the river; she grimaced at how filthy they were after lying in the dirt.

"Could you take mine, too?" Rutger pleaded. "It's hard enough for me to fit through this ridiculous cave as it is."

"Don't know if I can handle your twigs," Mothball muttered. "Might tip me over."

Rutger happily picked them up, then threw them on top of the stack bundled in her arms. One end smacked her in the nose.

“Blimey, that hurt! Go on with ya, get in the ruddy lift.”

Master George had already entered the well-hidden elevator, waiting with arms folded and slightly shaking his head, as if observing the antics of misbehaving children. “Please, would you two *hurry?*”

Rutger sucked in a huge breath, trying to shrink his tummy, then ran forward into the dark slice of air between the two vertical walls of the cave. He made it two feet before he came to an abrupt halt; his legs dangled below him, his body lodged in place.

“Help!” he cried out, like a monster was coming to eat him.

Mothball snorted as she held in a laugh. With glee, she balanced herself, lifted one leg, cocked it, then kicked Rutger in the rear end as hard as she could. As he tumbled forward into the elevator, he managed to say, “Thank you!”

Mothball stepped onto the lift and pushed the *up* button.

Buzz.

Sato looked up from his bed where he’d been reading through his reports again. The intercom had rung for him. He put his papers aside, swung his legs off the bed and onto the floor, then reached over to hit the button on the wall.

“Yes?” he shouted.

“Ow, do you have to answer so loud?” It was Rutger, his voice a hollow echo of itself.

“Sorry. What do you want?”

“We’re meeting in the conference room in ten minutes. I’ll be providing refreshments, so snap-snap!”

Click.

Sato put his elbows on his knees and rubbed his face with both hands. The nightmare of his parents’ death had seemed more vivid lately, the horrific images floating in his thoughts for hours after waking up. They hung in his mind like dirty, tattered drapes blocking out the sunlight. He shook his head and bent over to put his shoes on.

“Another meeting,” he mumbled. “Joy.”

A few minutes later, he slid into a cushy chair around the conference table, reaching out to grab a Chocolate Chip-Peanut Butter-Butterscotch-Pecan-Walnut-Macadamia-Coconut-Delight, one of Rutger’s specialties. The little man always said the name in full, despite its length. No one in the complex cared what they were called because they tasted delicious.

Everyone else was already seated: Mothball and Rutger to his right, Master George across from him, Sally to his left. They were the only Realitants at the

Grand Canyon Center at the moment—the others had gone off with various duties and assignments.

“Sorry to bother you, Sato,” George said. “I know you wanted some time for a bit of relaxing after we spoke earlier, but I felt this gathering couldn’t wait.”

“No problem,” Sato muttered. He’d tried so hard to improve his mood lately, but the recent spout of dreams had quashed his efforts. The world seemed bleak and grim—the only thing that gave him reprieve was trying to figure out the mystery of the crazy people.

George rested his clasped hands on the table in front of him. “First, let’s summarize where we are at the moment. Thanks to our good man Sally, here”—he gave a nod to the lumberjack, who seemed lost in thought, his thumb picking suspiciously at his nose—“for putting the Earwig Transponder inside Tick so we could track him better and scramble Chu’s eavesdropping capabilities. For as long as I shall live, I shan’t forgive that man for his violation of Rule Number 462 on those poor kids. Hijacking a nanolocator . . . it’s evil, I tell you!”

George’s hands squeezed together as his face reddened. “But the milk’s in the kitty litter, as my mum was fond of saying—no use weeping and wailing. With the transponder in Tick’s ear, we’ll have much more information.” He cleared his throat. “For example, we know they’ve just had a bizarre incident in the Tenth Reality, but we’re not quite sure what happened.”

Rutger slammed his hand on the table. “Don’t tell me that wretch stuck them in the Grinder Beast’s training tunnels?”

Sato leaned forward at this question—the words *Grinder Beast* would perk anyone’s attention.

George nodded. “Indeed. I must say, I was rather tempted to go rescue them, but I didn’t want to ruin our chances at getting on the inside of Chu’s plans. I believe we all agree that Chu would not put them in total danger—not yet, anyway. It appears he’s running them through some sort of test, and I can’t imagine he’d waste their potential by letting one of the Grinders kill them so easily. They serve us best as spies—albeit unknowing spies—at the moment.”

“That’s a big risk on your part, it is,” Mothball said, the most accusatory thing Sato had ever heard her say to George. The tall woman loved those kids like her own children. Sato felt a little jealous; she didn’t seem to care so much for him.

“That’s neither here nor there,” George responded. “I was right to wait. They’ve been winked to the Sixth by Chu, where they seem to be safe and sound for the time being.”

“What was that you said about a bizarre incident?” Sato asked.

“I can’t say for sure. There was a surge in Chi’karda in that area, some kind of great disturbance that caused a Ripple Quake in one of the fragmented Realities. If I had to guess, I’d say Chu destroyed one of the training tunnels in order to wink them out. That glass is particularly resistant to Barrier Wands.”

“But how would he do that?” Rutger asked.

“Well . . . that brings us to our next item of discussion.” George looked over at Sato. “Based on the information Sato has gathered, combined with the evidence of our spies and the disturbances we’ve seen this past summer, I believe Chu has built some sort of superweapon that contains more simulated Chi’karda power than anything ever built previously. I believe it’s responsible for some of the odd things happening to Tick and the others, as well as for spreading the plague of insanity.”

Everyone turned to look at Sato, as if he would follow this up with a brilliant statement supporting George’s theory.

“Everything points to that,” he said, unable to think of anything else. George had said it better than he ever could.

“We can dig more into the details later in the meeting,” George continued, “but I want to put something on the table now before we say another word. It’s rare that I must give an assignment as terribly important as the one I’m about to ask of Sato.”

Sato’s mind had been drifting, and he wasn’t sure he’d heard correctly. “What was that? An assignment?”

“Yes, a mission of sorts.”

Sato swallowed. He felt as if the temperature in the room had risen twenty degrees. “You want *me* to . . .” He had mentioned the possibility of sending someone to gather samples, but he’d never guessed the old man would choose *him*.

“I can think of no better Realitant for this than you, Sato. You have stealth and wit about you. Plus, no one will suspect someone so young, and if you do get in a bind, I trust your ability to get out of it.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Rutger said, squirming on his booster seat. “What mission are you talking about?”

George paused before answering. “Sato and I are positive the explanation for people going crazy is some type of plague—literally. And we’re quite sure it’s linked to Chu’s superweapon. I want to send Sato into the area most infected with this plague and obtain a blood sample from one of the victims. Until we understand the disease, we won’t know how to fight it.”

Sato barely heard George’s words, as if they were coming down a long, dark tunnel. George wanted to send *him*. What if . . . what if he *caught* the plague? He was perfectly willing to face danger in his quest to avenge his

parents' death, but the prospect of a nasty disease that made you crazy sickened him. Frightened him.

"Are you up to it?" Mothball asked, reaching over and patting Sato's arm.

"Huh? What?" he said.

"Are you up to it, I said."

Sato looked around at the others in the room. Several beads of sweat finally let go and slid down his temples. He hadn't expected *this*.

"I . . . uh . . ." In that moment, the image of his parents burning popped into his head, and his squishy fear hardened into concrete resolve.

"I'll do it," he said, trying his best to keep his voice firm. "I'll be fine."

Sally stood up, folding his arms across his broad chest. "I reckon I'll go wid the young fella."

George shook his head. "No, Sally. I have an entirely different mission for you."

Lots of Left Turns

They'd been walking for hours.

This new Reality seemed the most normal of any Tick had visited so far. Aside from a few oddities, it wasn't much different from his hometown in Reality Prime. One of those differences was the style of the buildings and the clothes of the citizens. It was slight, but everything here seemed a little more elaborate, a little fancier. Many businesses had huge fountains in front, with complex displays of shooting water; the moldings on the houses had carved pictures of animals and trees. The men wore fancy dark suits and greased back their hair, and the women wore dresses with white gloves pulled clear past their elbows. Also, an eerie, operatic soprano voice sang from speakers throughout the town.

Another odd thing: the place appeared to only have left turns—at least off the road on which they currently walked.

“Dude, what's up with this?” Paul said, pointing to his right, where a thick forest of tall trees loomed like an ominous wall. “Look at all that land out there. Why aren't they building on it?”

“Who cares?” Sofia said, annoyance creeping back into her voice. “Maybe they're a bunch of idiots.”

Tick understood her mood. Even though the weather was pleasant here—partly cloudy sky, soft breeze, warm but not hot—he felt like they were going nowhere fast. Not to mention the sick feeling he still had from almost being trampled by a raging monster inside a gigantic glass straw.

Paul yawned. “Just seems a little weird that there's this huge town to our left, but nothing at all to our right. We should open a real estate office.”

Sofia ignored him. “Well, our plan to stay on this road isn't working. I say we go into the city.”

“Me too,” Tick agreed. “Everything is starting to look the same—I swear I saw that exact building a couple of hours ago.” He pointed to a tall office complex made of dark granite with shiny, black windows that sparkled as if inlaid with gold.

“Whoa,” Paul said, stopping.

“What?” Tick and Sofia asked at the same time.

“That building doesn't just look familiar—it *is* the same one we saw earlier. I'm positive. Man, this road is a ginormous circle that goes *around* the city. No wonder we're not getting anywhere.”

“That explains all the left turns,” Tick added.

“I thought we were all supposed to be smart,” Sofia said. “It took us *how* long to figure this out?”

“Come on,” Paul said. “Let’s go into the town and find a sweet old lady who’s willing to feed some starving kids.”

Right on cue, Tick’s stomach rumbled with hunger. “Hope our money works here.”

“I doubt it, but we can try,” Paul said.

At the next road, they turned left, the wall of trees now at their backs.

Reginald looked down at the weaselly little hotel owner of Circle City, rocking between his two feet, fidgeting with the buttons on his fancy red vest. Chu was astonished that someone could show so much weakness in front of another grown man. His name was Phillip, and he couldn’t be more than five feet tall, fat, with streaks of black hair pasted in greasy lines across his obviously bald head.

Ah, yes. The comb-over. Delightful. Reginald swore that if he ever went bald, he’d simply invent a way to make his hair grow back. *Hmm*, he thought. *I can’t believe I haven’t done that yet . . .*

“What do I get out of all this?” Phillip said, his voice sounding to Reginald like a talking rat high on helium. “And how do I find the kids?”

“They’re in the city. Three young teenagers—a Caucasian with brown hair, a girl with black hair, and a dark-skinned boy who’s a full foot taller than you and ten times as handsome. They’ll be wandering around, obviously lost, smelling like a bag of three-week-old tuna—the brats haven’t showered in days.”

Frankly, Reginald was annoyed that Atticus still had the other two kids with him. He’d hoped they’d have been killed by now, but they seemed as determined as their powerful friend. No matter. That was the beauty of the test—there were no rules, not really. If Atticus made it to the end, he made it to the end. Even if he had the help of friends and the Realitants.

Realitants. What a waste of human DNA.

“All right,” Phillip said. “I’ll send out my boys to find them, bring them here, offer them rooms, as you said.”

“And feed them. They’ll be here at least a week, probably longer. I want the boy—I mean, I want *all* of them—well-rested and strong for what lies ahead. I will pay you double your rates, plus a bonus.”

“What kind of bonus?” The hotel owner tried his very best to display an expression of professional hardball on his face, but it looked more like a fat squirrel eyeing an acorn.

Reginald stifled a laugh. “The value of one week’s worth of rent for all

your rooms.”

Phillip choked, his eyes wide with the prospect of such a sum for doing almost nothing. “I’ll have to think about—”

“Shut up and take the deal,” Reginald said.

Phillip nodded, his face flushed red. “Okay, it’s a deal. I’ll have them here, safe and sound, by tonight.”

“Good.” Reginald reached into his pocket and pulled out two sealed envelopes, then handed them over. “The thick one is half your money, including the bonus, plus money for the kids to spend. You’ll get the rest of your portion when they . . . disappear.”

“And this other one?” The hotel owner held up the thin envelope.

“I want you to deliver that to them at precisely six o’clock. If you can’t get them to the hotel before then, wait until morning to deliver it. I don’t care if it’s am or pm, just give it to them at *six* o’clock.”

Phillip’s eyes squinched up in confusion.

“Don’t ask any more questions,” Reginald said. “Just do as I say and enjoy the money.”

After giving Phillip a few more instructions, Reginald turned and walked away, enjoying himself and his clever ways even more than usual.

“All right,” Paul said as they passed a small group of kids playing a version of soccer with a square ball. “I’ve known for awhile that *you* guys stink, but now I can smell *myself*. I don’t care if it’s in one of those fancy fountains—I need to get clean.”

Tick lifted up his arm and smelled his armpit. “We do stink. Dude.”

“I don’t,” Sofia said. “But I’m starving.”

“I’m glad you think you smell so nice,” Paul said, stopping to study Sofia up and down. “What’s your secret?”

Sofia halted as well, folding her arms and returning the stare. “I don’t sweat.”

“You don’t sweat?” Paul looked over at Tick. “She doesn’t sweat, Tick. Now I’ve heard everything.” He continued walking toward the center of town, shaking his head.

Nothing much had changed since they’d left the border road and headed deeper into the city. The buildings had gotten a little bigger with fewer pillars and less frilly decoration; apartments and condos had replaced the extravagant neighborhood homes. The sun had sunk lower in the sky, the darkened glow of twilight fast approaching. None of the people they passed paid them much mind, despite their dirty clothes and haggard appearance. Everyone seemed

extremely busy—all made up and pressed clean.

“Look up there,” Sofia said, pointing straight ahead.

Less than a quarter-mile ahead of them, twelve roads came together like spokes of a wheel, intersecting in a huge open-air mall where hundreds of people milled about. Tick realized something, and he couldn’t believe he hadn’t noticed it before.

“Where are all the cars?” he asked.

Sofia and Paul stopped, as if stunned by the simple question.

Paul snapped his fingers. “I knew something was missing. We haven’t seen a single car.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Sofia said. “There’s nothing primitive about this place. If anything, it seems a little more advanced than our reality.”

“Ah, dude,” Paul said. “What if they beam around like in *Star Trek*?”

Sofia snorted. “I’ll be sure to ask Dark Gator if I see him.”

Paul burst out laughing; Tick held his laugh in, pressing his mouth closed.

“What?” Sofia said.

“What did you call him?” Paul asked.

“Dark Gator.”

“Man, oh, man, you are too good to be true, Miss Italy, too good to be true.” Still chuckling, he walked toward all the people. “I think I see a restaurant up there. Let’s check it out.”

Sofia looked at Tick, her eyebrows raised.

“It’s *Darth Vader*,” he whispered. “And he’s from *Star Wars*, not *Star Trek*.”

“Well, they both sound stupid,” she concluded, then followed Paul.

The mall was a collection of all sorts of shops and eateries, surround by a broad expanse of inlaid bricks. The three of them stopped to see which restaurant looked most appetizing—assuming, of course, they accepted Reality Prime money. Tick’s hopes were rising, because this place had some of the same fast-food chains as back home—their logos were just slightly different.

“Ooh, look—” Tick started to say, but a man stopped him by pulling on his elbow. Tick looked behind him to see a short, fidgety man with the worst comb-over Tick had ever seen.

“Excuse me,” the man said, his face breaking into a smile that would have looked more natural on a rattlesnake. “Is your name, er, Atticus Higginbottom?”

Tick didn’t know what he’d expected the man to say, but his mouth dropped open and his heart started thumping.

“Um,” he said, looking over at his friends to see if they’d heard. By the

stunned looks on their faces, he figured they had. He turned back to the man. “Yeah, I’m Tick, I mean, Atticus.”

“That’s great, real great,” the man said, more relieved than happy. “Someone named, um, Mothball asked me to find you and offer you rooms in my hotel, The Stroke of Midnight Inn. My name is Phillip, and I’m happy to accommodate you.”

Then he bowed. He actually *bowed*.

Tick felt immediately suspicious, and it only took a second for him to see his friends felt the same.

“Mothball sent you?” Sofia asked.

“Why didn’t she come herself?” Paul added.

Phillip pulled his head back, looking like a startled—albeit pudgy—chicken. “I don’t know—why would I make something like that up?”

“What does she look like?” Tick asked.

The man didn’t hesitate. “She’s very tall—the tallest person I’ve ever laid eyes on. Black hair, thin, not very . . . well, what I mean to say is . . . well, she’s a bit homely, to be honest.”

“A-plus on that quiz,” Paul muttered, and Tick felt himself relax a little.

“She said you’d be staying here for a week or so,” Phillip continued. “She paid me in advance and asked me to provide you three meals a day, plus whatever else you might need.”

The prospect of a nice hotel room, a hot shower, and all the food he could eat sounded to Tick like the single best idea in the history of best ideas.

“Good enough for me,” Paul said. “Where do we go?”

“Wait a minute,” Sofia said, holding out her hand. “There has to be something else. There’s no message, no reason, nothing? I don’t like this.”

“Actually,” Phillip said, “she did leave you an envelope. It’s sealed, so of course I don’t know its contents. Oddly enough, she asked me to give it to you at exactly six o’clock.” He looked at his watch. “Um, tomorrow morning.”

Tick looked at his own watch—it was just past six-thirty. “Sounds pretty legit to me. I actually feel a ton better—like maybe Master George is behind all of this after all.”

“Yeah,” Paul agreed. “Let’s go eat.”

Sofia didn’t answer at first, her eyes distant as she thought it over. “Where’s the hotel?” she finally asked.

“Right this way,” Phillip said, stepping aside and sweeping his arm wide. “If you’ll follow me, it’s on the edge of town. In fact, I’ve reserved rooms for you with a great view.”

As Phillip led the group north along the road, Paul asked, “A view of

what?"

"The forest, of course," Phillip said without missing a step. "If you look out your window after dark, you might see the glowing monkeys."

Tick waited for the man to laugh, but the only one who did was Paul. Tick almost asked if he'd been serious, but with everyone else silent, he felt stupid for even thinking it. Of course the guy was kidding. Wasn't he?

The Time Riddle

The hotel was like something out of Hollywood. Big pillars, stamped gold everywhere, doormen in green velvet coats running around, treating their guests like royalty. A huge sign hung above the entrance with *The Stroke of Midnight Inn* written in fancy script. Inside, everything sparkled and shone, and not a person in sight had a grimace or the slightest hint of a frown. Plush red carpet blanketed the floors and grand staircase, over which an enormous chandelier hung with hundreds of crystalline lights.

I've died and gone to heaven, Tick thought.

He knew Paul must feel the same, but Sofia would surely find something to complain about, having come from such a rich family.

Phillip led them to the fourth floor—walking up the stairs, the poor man sucked in huge gasps of breath with every step—and down a long hallway to their rooms. When Paul asked him why they hadn't used the elevator, Phillip responded with a baffled look, as if he'd never heard of such a thing.

Phillip opened up a room with an old-fashioned key. Tick was surprised since he'd only ever seen the magnetic-stripe key card at hotels. The room was filled with normal hotel things: a king-sized bed, a small refrigerator, a couch, a desk, and a bathroom. The only difference was that the items were ten times nicer than the stuff in hotels Tick had been in when his family traveled.

"There are three rooms in all," Phillip announced, passing out keys accordingly. "There's a menu on the desk for you to order food from the restaurant. Please be reasonable, but make sure you feed yourself nicely. Is there anything—"

"Where's the TV?" Paul asked.

Phillip gave him that same bewildered look, his brow crunched up into dozens of wrinkles. "A TV? What's that?"

"Television. You know—movies, shows, commercials, *television*?"

"Sorry, I don't know what you're talking about."

Tick looked at the light on the wall, which Phillip had turned on when they'd entered the room. They obviously had electricity here, but seemed to be missing a lot of other things common to Reality Prime.

As if reading his mind, Sofia asked, "Where are all the cars?"

Phillip put his hands in his pockets, his confused look morphing into suspicion. "Cars have been banned for at least twenty years."

"Banned?" Tick asked. "Why?"

“And how do you get around?” Paul asked before Phillip could respond.

The hotel man shook his head, looking at his three guests in turn. “When that . . . when Mothball made me this deal, I didn’t realize she’d be sending such odd people. Where are you kids from?”

“Florida,” Paul answered. “Well, originally from California—”

Sofia cut him off. “It doesn’t matter. But we’re curious about the cars. Where we come from, they still use them.”

“The darn things were polluting us to death,” Phillip said, still appearing uneasy as he rocked back and forth on his feet. “So they banned them, made towns where everything was in walking distance. If you want to visit another town, you take the Underground Railroad—named after the lady who escaped the slave drivers a long time ago—the one who became president, Harrietta Tubben.”

Tick and Sofia exchanged baffled looks.

“So you’ve got trains, underground?” Paul asked.

“Fastest ones in the world,” Phillip answered, eyeing the door. “If there’s nothing else . . .”

“Thanks for letting us stay here,” Tick said, liking the idea of seeing Phillip leave and finally ordering some food. “Don’t forget to bring us that message from Mothball.”

“I won’t, I won’t,” the man assured them, already backing out the door into the hallway. “Order a nice dinner and get some rest.”

Tick closed the door before the last word made it all the way out of Phillip’s mouth.

“Well,” Sofia said, “this place is just like home compared to the last Reality—desert, glass tunnel, raging beast.”

“All I care about right now is food,” Paul said. He’d already picked up the phone to call room service.

Later that night, his stomach stuffed with roasted duck and asparagus (they didn’t have pizza or hamburgers in this place), fully showered and clean, Tick lay in his bed and stared at the ceiling. Every ounce of his body begged for sleep, his mind deadened with exhaustion. And yet, he remained awake.

Man, I have a weird life.

He’d lost track of how long they’d been gone—it seemed like a month, but he knew it was only a few days, maybe a week at most. He knew his mom and dad were back home, worry eating at them like ferrets trapped in their gut, trying to stay chipper for Lisa and Kayla. Tick wished he could send them a message, talk to them somehow. Just to let them know he was okay.

A hard knock at his door made him jump. Crumpling up the sheets in his bed, he wiggled into a sitting position, his back pressed against the wall. He stared at the small space under the door, where two small shadows marked someone's feet.

"Who is it?" he called out, embarrassed at how shaky his voice sounded to his own ears.

"It's me, sleepyhead," Paul replied, the words muffled through the wood.

Tick sighed with relief as he threw the covers aside. He hurried over and opened the door. Sofia was behind Paul, her eyes puffy with sleep. Each of them wore fancy-looking flannel pajamas provided by the hotel, and Sofia's looked about three sizes too big.

"What's going on?" Tick asked.

"Dude, have you looked out the window?" Paul stepped into the room, pushing past Tick.

"Um, no." Tick stepped aside to let Sofia in, then closed the door. He flicked on the light, but Paul quickly waved his hand at him.

"No, dude, turn it off!"

Tick did as he was told, grumbling a little. All he wanted right now was to be left alone and sleep for days. He felt so tired and his body hurt like he had the flu. The only light in the room was a mysterious panel on the wall that shone a dull yellow. Something about it gave Tick the creeps.

Paul leaned next to the window, carefully pulling aside the curtains to peek through the corner, as if spying on someone in the parking lot. Tick faltered as he joined Paul—this place didn't *have* a parking lot.

"What are you looking at?" Tick asked.

Sofia knelt at the other end of the window, lifting that corner of the curtains to peer out. The two of them looked ridiculous.

"Santy Claus," Paul whispered. "What do you *think* we're looking at?"

"I don't know—that's why I asked."

Sofia turned toward Tick, the disgusted look on her face barely discernible in the faint light. "The glowing monkeys."

"Oh, yeah!" Tick couldn't believe he'd not even looked—a sign that his brain had gone to sleep even though his body had refused. He squatted on the floor between his friends and slowly lifted the bottom of the curtain to take a peek.

Outside, the dark forest stood like a fortress wall, massive trees silhouetted by the pale moonlight seeping through the thick clouds above. The city behind the hotel had a surprising lack of nighttime lights, making Tick feel like they were in a cabin deep in the wilderness. And there in the woods, radiant and eerie and constantly in motion, dozens of creepy glowing shapes

moved about the trees.

“Those don’t look like monkeys,” Tick whispered. When he’d heard the word *glowing*, he’d imagined his old skeleton Halloween decoration back home, which appeared as a whitish-yellowish blur in the darkness. But this light was much different. This light was bright and stark and reddish, and the creatures looked a lot bigger than monkeys. “They look more like . . . radioactive bears.”

“Yeah,” Paul whispered back. “Demon bears.”

“Why are you guys whispering?” Sofia said, so loud that both Tick and Paul quickly shushed her. “What? You think those things will come and eat us? I’m pretty sure the hotel would’ve gone out of business if their customers were routinely eaten by monkeys whenever they spoke louder than a whisper.”

“I don’t know,” Paul said, still in a low voice. “Just seems like you should whisper when spying on monstrous, glowing creatures. So be quiet.”

“Pansy,” Sofia muttered, returning to the window.

Paul reached over and elbowed Tick. “Did you teach her that word?”

“No.”

“She’s getting way too American—makes me uncomfortable.”

Sofia tsked. “I love it when you guys talk about me as if I can’t hear you.”

“What do you think those things are?” Tick asked, trying to steer the conversation in a different direction before Paul ended up getting punched again.

“I bet it has something to do with the ban on cars,” Sofia said. “Something really weird happened here. Maybe it affected the animals. Maybe they *are* radioactive.”

“Remind me not to go on a walk out there tomorrow after breakfast,” Paul said.

Tick let the curtain fall into place and leaned back against the bed. “That’s enough monkey-watching for me. Phillip’s bringing us that message from Mothball in just a few hours. We need some sleep.”

“How can you sleep with psycho-radioactive-gorilla-bears playing outside your window?” Paul asked, his nose seemingly glued to the glass.

“I think I’ll manage. Get out.”

Surprisingly, Sofia grumbled more than Paul did as Tick kicked them out of his room.

The next morning, Phillip didn’t pound the door nearly as hard as Paul had done just a few hours earlier. At first, the light tapping came in the form of a

woodpecker in Tick's dream, one where he sat in the backyard laughing while his dad jumped about trying to put out flames on the barbecue. It happened every time the man made hamburgers, which is why Tick always made sure he had a front-row seat.

A woodpecker had never been there, however, and even in his dream, Tick knew something was wrong. When it kept knocking and pecking and tapping, he somehow pulled himself out of sleep. With groggy eyes and cottonmouth, he got out of bed and stumbled to the door, sad that the dream had been interrupted.

Phillip wore the exact same clothes as he had yesterday, still rocking back and forth on his feet. He handed over a yellow envelope—one that looked very familiar to Tick, who snatched it without meaning to.

"Sorry," he said. "Just eager to read it."

"Are you finding your stay pleasant?" Phillip asked, no emotion or sincerity in his voice whatsoever.

"Yes, we really appreciate it," Tick said, unable to take his eyes off the envelope, which bore no marking or writing. When he finally looked up, Phillip had already begun walking down the hall toward the stairs.

Thoughts of the odd man quickly evaporated as Tick hurried to knock on Paul's door. It took three tries, but Paul finally answered, rubbing his eyes.

"Come on," Tick urged, heading next door to Sofia's room.

He'd just held up his hand to knock when the door flew open, Sofia waiting there—fully dressed in her newly provided clothes and looking surprisingly pretty. "Did you get the note?"

Tick held up the envelope.

"Then get in here and let's open it," she said, stepping aside and almost comically jerking her head toward the inside.

Tick entered and sat in the desk chair, with Paul looking over his right shoulder, Sofia his left. With slightly trembling hands, Tick opened the envelope and pulled out a piece of white cardstock paper. With the others following along, he read the typed words out loud:

This place is nice, but not quite heaven.

You must start on the hour of seven

Add six hours then take away three,

Then add ten more and do it with glee.

Let one week of time go by,

Sit and rest and eat and sigh.

Then twenty-two hours less three plus two,

At that time decide what to do.

It does not matter; I do not care.

Just make sure your feet find air.

“It’s easy,” Sofia said.

“Yeah, too easy,” Paul agreed. “Which means we’re in deep trouble.”

Tick shook his head. “It’ll be easy to figure out the time, but there’s nothing that tells us what to do *at that time.*”

“Yowza,” Paul said, then whistled. “You’re dead on. What are we supposed to do at five in the afternoon one week from tomorrow?”

Tick jerked his head around to look up at Paul. “You already figured it out?”

“I told you it was easy.” He slapped Tick on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, little dude, not everyone can be as brilliant as the Paulmeister.”

Sofia snorted. “I figured it out, too, Einstein.”

Tick quickly ran through the riddle in his head. Sure enough—5:00 pm, one week from tomorrow.

“A whole week?” he said. “What are we supposed to do until then?”

“I’ll tell you what we do,” Paul said, flopping onto the small couch and sticking his feet up on the armrest. “What my grandpa calls a little R and R.”

Sofia walked over and slapped Paul’s feet to the floor, almost knocking his whole body off the couch.

“If you ever did that in my house, my butler would chop off one of your toes.” She sat next to him, ignoring his stuck-out tongue. “It does sound good to relax for awhile, but we’d better start thinking hard about what’s hidden in that message.”

“Yeah,” Tick said. “What happens if five o’clock rolls around and we don’t do what we’re supposed to?”

His only answer was a very long silence.

An Insane Mission

Sato adjusted the straps on his backpack, pulling them tight so they wouldn't rub blisters on his skin. It was heavy, Mothball and Rutger having gone overboard as usual to make sure he had everything he needed.

"What did you put in here?" he asked. They stood by the window overlooking the Grand Canyon, the early streams of sunrise reflecting off the sheer stone walls with a reddish glow. "Some bricks in case I need to build a house?"

Mothball laughed. "Methinks you've a sense of humor after all, Sato." She reached down and tousled the hair on Rutger's head. "Almost as funny as this one, 'ere."

Rutger huffed. "He only seems funny because he's the world's biggest grouch. Anything slightly different pops out of his mouth, and everyone laughs like he's Bojinkles the Clown."

"Who?" Sato asked.

Rutger slapped his hands to his face. "Who? *Who?*" He stomped his right foot. "Don't tell me you haven't heard of Bojinkles! Oh, how he made me chuckle when I'd read him in the funny parcels as a kid . . ."

His voice wandered off as he stared at something through the window, seemingly lost in childhood memories. Sato and Mothball exchanged a look, both of them stifling a laugh.

Just then, George entered the room, his face flushed like he'd been running a race. He held a Barrier Wand in one hand, so sparkly and shiny it appeared brand-new.

"Ah!" he said. "Looks like Master Sato is all set and ready to go."

George stepped in front of Sato, inspecting him like he was a soldier going off to war. Sato still felt confused inside, his mind and heart full of swirling, haunted images and feelings. He'd grown to trust George and the others, had grown to accept his role as a Realitant. He'd especially solidified his resolve to avenge the murder of his parents.

And yet . . . for so many years, the man before him had represented all the terrible things in his life. George had been there that day. Why hadn't he saved his parents?

"Ready as I'll ever be," Sato said, momentarily closing his eyes to squeeze away his ill thoughts.

"Splendid," George said, taking a step back so he could look at the three of them. "Our dear friend Sally is off, too. He, er, didn't want to say good-bye

because of, er, well, you know—what we did to his hair to disguise him. The old chap’s surprisingly vain about his looks after all.”

“Well, I *do* know how he feels,” Rutger said, smoothing his black hair.

George turned to Sato, his face serious, squinting as if he couldn’t quite focus on Sato’s face. “Are you *certain* about this?”

“I’m doing this for my parents.”

George nodded absentmindedly. “Yes, yes, indeed. Your bravery would make them proud.”

Sato fumed inside. He wanted to scream at the old man, blame him for their deaths. But he stayed silent, channeling his thoughts into the task at hand.

“The needle and vials are in the outer pocket of your pack,” Rutger said. “They’re bubble-wrapped for protection, but please be careful. You have only a couple of extras.”

George grunted, but Sato wasn’t sure what that meant. “We want you to get in and get out. You’ll be winking to the original Reality, the . . . *host* Reality where all of this nonsense began. It’s not one of the major branches, and it’s fragmenting as we speak. Still not sure of the event that was so powerful as to make them completely unstable.” He shook his head. “I need not remind you of the necessity of caution.”

“In and out,” Sato said, staring at the wall in front of him. An old picture of Muffintops hung there, a close-up from when she was a kitten, licking something that looked suspiciously like George’s foot. “The first crazy person I meet. No problem.”

Rutger cleared his throat. “It might not be *that* easy. Most people won’t let you walk up and stick a needle in them.”

“Specially the crazies,” Mothball added.

“Then I’ll use the . . . thing you gave me.” Sato jerked his head toward the top of his backpack.

“Only as a last resort,” George said, holding up a finger. “A last resort.”

Sato shrugged. “Last resort. What does it matter—they’re all crazy.”

“It matters because we’re trying to *save* them, find a cure,” George answered.

“But it’s a fragmented Reality,” Sato countered. “Again, what does it matter?”

George shook his head. “It’s not our place to determine the value of their lives, Master Sato. They’re people, just like you and me.”

“Chances are one of ’em *is* you, actually,” Mothball said with a quick snort of a laugh. When no one responded, she continued, “His Alterant. Get it?”

“Yes, Mothball, we got it,” Rutger muttered as he shot a look at Sato as if

to say, *just humor her*. “Good one, very funny.”

As for Sato, his head spun; it was impossible to wrap his rational mind around the confusing facts of how the multiverse functioned. “I’m ready. Wink me away.”

George held up the Barrier Wand in both hands. “You’ll appear on the stone outcropping of a mountain; it’s soaked in Chi’karda, for reasons we don’t know. Return there when you’ve obtained the blood sample. Rutger will have his eyes glued to the command console and will wink you back the instant you’re ready. Your nanolocator is in good working condition.”

“Okay,” Sato said, taking a deep breath as he reached out and clasped his hands around the bottom of the golden cylinder. *Just do it before I change my mind.*

“Best of lu—” Mothball started to say, but she was cut off with the click of the Wand ignition button.

Sato winked away.

“Mmm, this rabbit food ain’t so bad,” Paul mumbled through a bite of fancy salad—walnuts and pears scattered over dark green leaves.

They sat at a table in the hotel restaurant, the last gloomy glow of sunset painting the large windows a sleepy amber. They’d spent most of the day walking, making three complete trips around the main road that circled the town—aptly named Circle City. They saw nothing new—more buildings, more nicely-dressed people, more glittering fountains, more eerie opera music—as they discussed the riddle and the possible hidden meaning behind it between long bouts of silence.

“This Reality must not have an Italy,” Sofia said. “Nothing on the menu even comes close to real food.”

Tick nodded, too busy eating to say anything. He’d ordered something he couldn’t pronounce but which looked and tasted like pork chops, and he was loving every bite. Sofia, stubborn as usual, hadn’t even ordered yet, still staring at the menu like an impossible homework problem.

“Just get the chicken stuff,” Paul said, wiping his mouth. “They eat chicken in Italy, don’t they?”

“Well . . .” Sofia said, her eyes focusing on one item. “This one does have some kind of cheese on it.”

“Really?” Paul said, leaning over to take a look at where her finger pointed. “Chicken and cheese. I’m getting that next time.”

Tick quit listening to them, having noticed a strange man enter the restaurant, looking about as if he was lost. He was heavily built, head shaved bald, and dressed in a suit as fancy as any Tick had ever seen worn by Master

George. The man's eyes finally fell on Tick and his friends, and he started walking directly for them, stumbling twice in his polished new shoes.

"Uh-oh," Tick whispered. When Paul and Sofia looked at him, he nodded toward the stranger.

"Who's that guy?" Paul asked.

Tick only shrugged.

When the man reached their table, he bowed awkwardly. "Good . . . day," he said very slowly, taking time to carefully pronounce each word. "I . . . welcome . . . you . . . to . . . our . . . city."

He bowed again, then turned to walk away. As he took his first step, he reached into his pocket, pulled out a slip of paper, and let it fall to the floor. It was such an obvious act that none of them called it to the man's attention. He kept moving, continuing in his halting gait until he'd left the restaurant, never once turning around to look back.

Paul practically jumped onto the floor to pick up the paper, then unfolded it on the table. Tick and Sofia scooted their chairs around to see the message:

DO NOT READ THIS ALOUD!

I'm a friend of Master George.

Meet me in Tick's room at 9:00.

Don't say a word to me.

We must communicate in writing.

People are listening.

The first thing Sato felt was frigid air, gusting in short bursts of wind that bit through his clothes, pricking his skin like dagger points. Feeling as if he'd just plunged into an icy lake, he gasped for air as he swung off his backpack and searched for the thick down coat within. As he pulled it out and stuffed his arms inside the soft, warm lining, he gaped at the place George had decided to send him.

The highest reaches of an enormous mountain, blanketed in snow.

He stood near the edge of a rocky outcropping which overlooked an infinite expanse of clouds, thin peaks of smaller mountains thrusting through the cottony layer here and there, black stone frosted in white. Above him, the sky was deep and dark and blue, like an ocean hanging impos-sibly over him. Realizing how high up he was, Sato stumbled backward, falling into the soft snow. The world seemed to sway around him.

He scrambled up and turned his back to the cliff, brushing the snow off before the cold stuff melted and soaked through. To his left, a steep path led up the mountain, the barely visible steps of roughly cut stone glistening with

ice. If that was the way he needed to go, it would be a treacherous journey. Other than a sparse bush and a few dead trees, he saw no sign of life anywhere—just endless rock and ice and snow.

Sato took a few steps to the right, hoping to see a more reasonable trail he could follow, but the jutting slice of rock ended in a sheer, knife-edge cliff, as if a recent earthquake had sent a huge chunk of the mountain falling to its splitting, crumpled death far below.

There was only one way to go.

Securing his pack, he started up the ancient stairway. He placed his feet very carefully, bracing them against the small vertical slab of stone marking the next step. Just when he thought he had the hang of it, his left foot slid backward, throwing his whole body forward; his chest slammed into a jutting edge of rock. Holding back a cry of pain, he chastised himself and took more care, leaning forward to grip the stairs above him with his hands, as if he were climbing a ladder.

The wind picked up, throwing spurts of snow into his face like cold, rough sand. The sun, though unhindered by clouds above him, failed to provide even a spark of warmth. He had to stop every few minutes to blow warm air into his cupped hands, rubbing them together to create friction. His ears and face grew numb. He looked up, hoping to see signs of life, a building, anything. Nothing.

He kept going, step by frigid step.

A half-hour went by. Sato started to worry that George had made a serious mistake, sent him to an abandoned nowhere by accident.

“George,” he spoke aloud, though the wind seemed to snap his words out of the air and whisk them away. “If you can hear me through the nanolocator—what’s going on? I’m freezing to death!”

Half-hoping he’d be winked away, Sato kept moving up the stairs.

Forty or fifty steps later, he finally saw the end of the staircase—a place where the stone stopped and all was white, a wall of snow and ice reaching for the sky. His heart sank at the thought that he might’ve reached a dead end.

Legs burning, limbs aching, skin frozen, he reached the uppermost step, which led out onto a small landing that faced a solid wall of dark granite, crystalline icicles hanging from the brief canopy of rock that protected it. In the middle of the wall was an iron door, ridges of rusty bolts lined around its outer edges. On the door was a sign, faded letters barely legible in the awful weather conditions.

Sato took a few steps forward to read the sign, his eyes squinted. They widened when he realized what it said:

End of the Road Insane Asylum

Mountaintop Exit
To Be Used for the Execution of Inmates Only

Cotton Ears

No one said a word, their eyes glancing at the clock every few seconds. In eight minutes, it would be nine o'clock—when they expected the visitor.

Tick sat on the bed, his back resting on a stack of pillows he'd pushed against the wall. In his mind, he'd been picturing the stranger who'd dropped off the note, trying to decide if they'd ever met. There was something vaguely familiar about him, but all Tick could remember was how strange the man acted, sounding out each word and looking about nervously.

Three minutes to go.

“What do you think—” Paul whispered, but Sofia punched him on the arm, then made a slashing gesture at her neck. Paul winced as he rubbed his shoulder.

They'd been dying to talk about the note since dinner, but paranoia kept their mouths shut—except for the occasional slip up from Paul. The stranger's message said people were listening, and now Tick couldn't sneeze without wondering what the snoopers might think. If the note was even true in the first place.

A barely discernible click sounded as the big hand on the old-fashioned clock struck nine. All three of them turned their heads toward the room's door, as if expecting the stranger to walk in precisely on time. He didn't.

Several minutes went by with no sign of their visitor. Paul finally got out of his chair and paced the floor, shaking his head and mumbling something under his breath. He stopped at the desk and wrote a few words on the pad of paper provided by the hotel, then tore the piece off and showed it to Sofia. She shrugged, and then Paul brought it over to Tick.

Don't we seem suspicious sitting here and not saying anything?

Tick nodded, but didn't know what else they could do. If people were really spying on them, they'd certainly be alarmed at how silent their prey had become.

I wish the guy would just hurry up and get here, Tick thought.

Paul sat back down in his chair. A few more minutes passed. A shadow crossed over the small slit under the door, catching Tick's attention out of the corner of his eye. He shifted on the bed and put his feet on the floor, leaning forward, expecting to hear a knock.

Nothing.

Tick exchanged questioning looks with Paul and Sofia, then got up and walked over to the door. It didn't have a peephole, so Tick reached forward

and slowly pushed down on the lever handle. A loud *click* filled the room like a clap of thunder; he squeezed his eyes shut, not even sure what he was afraid of.

After a few seconds of silence, he jerked the door open and looked into the hallway, ready to slam it shut again at any sign of trouble.

The stranger from the restaurant sat on the red-carpeted floor, his back against the opposite wall. He still wore the dark suit, his shoes so shiny that the hallway light reflected off them and into Tick's eyes. As soon as he saw Tick, he put his right index finger to his lips—a reminder they weren't supposed to talk.

Feeling uneasy, but unsure what else they could do, Tick stepped back and opened the door wide, gesturing with a sweep of his arm that the stranger should come in. The large man—bald head and all—got to his feet and entered the room, giving a quick nod to Paul and Sofia. Tick closed the door as quietly as he could.

The man sat on the bed, waving for the others to come and stand around him. As Tick and his friends obeyed, the stranger pulled out a photograph, a few pieces of paper, and a ballpoint pen. He'd already written one note and handed it to Tick along with the picture. In it, the man stood with Master George in front of the fireplace at the Grand Canyon Realitnant complex, both of them with wide smiles; Muffintops perched on the mantle behind Master George's right shoulder.

The message was clear: they could trust the guy.

Paul and Sofia crowded closer as they read the note together:

Your nanolocators done been hijacked. And this hotel is bugged like a bugger.

It's not Master George winking you willy-nilly. Reginald Chu is behind everything.

You **MUST** keep passing that sucker's tests.

At first, Tick felt like he was reading Spanish or French or Chinese—the words didn't click inside his brain. Such a monumental statement surely couldn't be said in a quickly scribbled note. He looked at the stranger, knowing his face showed the confusion he felt.

Master George's friend rolled his eyes and wrote another message, hastily scratching the paper with the pen. Then he held it up for them to read:

You've been under the control of Reginald Chu all along. He's testing you. Not Master George.

It's Chu—it's all been Chu.

Something shuddered in Tick's chest; the room swayed. Losing his balance, he stumbled backward, falling into the chair where Paul had been

sitting earlier.

Everything they'd just been through . . . the pain they'd felt in the forest, the riddles, the metaspides, the weird tunnel with its beast? All of it had been orchestrated by *Reginald Chu*? They'd suspected all along it wasn't Master George, but Chu? The man Rutger called the most evil in the universe?

"How—" Sofia said, then snapped her lips closed.

Tick felt like he was watching from a distance, the room still spinning. He kept picturing Mr. Chu, his science teacher, appearing in the woods, filthy and acting crazy. Had that really been him? Or had it been *Reginald Chu* from the Fourth Reality? Were they Alterants of each other? Was it possible they were the same person?

When Tick had been a small boy, he'd fallen off a ride at the water park, dozens of feet in the air. If he hadn't landed on the pile of large rafting tubes, he would have smacked into the cement and been one dead kid. It had taken him weeks to get over that "too close for comfort" feeling.

That was exactly how he felt now. To know they'd come so close to being killed by the metaspides and the tunnel monster scared him. What if they hadn't figured out the name of the pub where they escaped by sitting in that chair? What if they'd left the red square in the glass tube? How would things have turned out if they'd *known* someone so sinister was behind it all?

Tick leaned back in his chair, staring at the stranger on the bed as if the man could read his thoughts, expecting him to answer everything.

The man nodded, seeming to understand the shocking news he'd brought. He scribbled a few sentences on another piece of paper then handed it to Sofia. Tick and Paul leaned over to see:

By the way, I thought you'd done recognized me.

It's Sally—ain't my shaved head a beaut?

Don't worry, I'll explain purtin' near everything.

But you gotta trust me for a minute.

As soon as Tick read it, he knew it was true. The guy sitting on the bed was Sally, head and beard shaved, dressed in disguise. But the thing that made Tick's mouth drop open was the realization that *Sally* was a Realitant.

"You've gotta be kidding—" Paul whispered. He stopped when Sally shook his head curtly, holding a finger to his lips again.

Sally stood, holding his hands out, palms forward as if to say, *Hold on—give me a second*. Then he reached into the inner pocket of his suit coat and pulled out a small white box—the type in which you'd expect to find a necklace or bracelet, laid out all nice and pretty on a piece of velvet. He knelt down on the floor, placing the box gingerly on the bed, eyeing it like a ticking bomb he needed to disarm.

Paul elbowed Tick, then raised his eyebrows. Tick shrugged and quickly looked back.

Sally reached over and pulled off the top of the box, scooting as far back as he could.

Something shot out of the box and into the air—Tick lost track of it before he could tell what it was. An odd thump filled the air, like the sound of a distant thunderclap. Tick reached up and rubbed his ears; they felt like someone had stuffed cotton balls in them. He heard a faint buzz, like static on the radio.

Sally stood up, folded his arms, then grinned with satisfaction.

“Finally! Dadgum thing actually worked,” he said. “George ain’t never failed before—I reckon one of these days I’ll quit doubtin’ the old feller. But I didn’t wanna whip that sucker out ’til you knew who I was. We can talk now.”



Tick didn't say a word—neither did his friends. The last few minutes had been so strange, so . . . *weird*, what were they *supposed* to say?

Sally laughed, a deep rumble that Tick swore shook the building. “You three look as twitterpated as a coon done found itself fallen in the outhouse bucket. Right diddly-widdly, I ain’t never seen such a sight before. What ya’ll a-feared of? I had to play dress-up so Chu wouldn’t get all suspicious-like. Spies and such about, ya know.”

Still, none of them responded. Tick blinked, then swallowed. Then he blinked again.

“Snap out of it!” Sally roared. “We ain’t got no time to sit here throwin’ peepeyes. I got to hurry and gets myself on outta here.”

Sofia was the first one to speak. “It’s just, well, we didn’t . . . we didn’t know you were a Realitant.”

“Not to mention the news you just dropped in our laps,” Paul added. “I think I’m gettin’ too old for this stuff.”

“Nonsense,” Sally said, sitting on the bed and crossing his legs. As soon as he did, he winced and put both feet back on the floor. “Never did get how dem fancy lads like George sit that way. Yipes.”

The static-laced buzzing sound still filled the air; Tick rubbed his ears again. “Why is it okay to talk now? What was in the box?”

Sally huffed. “Boy, you think I got da first nary a clue what dat dang thing was? Round dem Realitant parts, I’m known for my brawn and grits-cookin’, not much on da brains. Ol’ George said pop that sucker open—called it a dang ol’ airborne nano whatchamerbucket—and we can talk. I done did it, and here I sit, talkin’ my silly head off, and we ain’t got nowhere fast.”

Tick took a deep breath before he’d realized it—a sigh of relief. Maybe the world wasn’t over after all.

“Sounds like you have a lot to tell us,” Sofia said.

Sally nodded. “Reckon so. Good gravy on raw beef, I ain’t got a clue where to git to start yappin’ on.”

Tick felt like he understood about one-third of what came out of Sally’s mouth, but he liked him all the same. “Just start from the beginning. How’d you find us in that weird place with the metal spiders? And what’s going on with Reginald Chu?” Saying the name slammed a fist of reality back into Tick’s gut, and his temporary good mood soured.

“All right, den.” Sally shifted on the bed until his back was up against the wall. “Ya’ll git yerselves comfy, and I’ll tell ya every last bit I got in dis here noggin. Ain’t much, mind ya, but listen up anyhow.”

Sally started talking.

Needles

Sato didn't know what else to do—he pounded on the huge metal door of the icy alcove with his fist. A deep, hollow boom echoed down the rocky mountainside. Sato shook his hand, needles of pain vibrating through his cold skin after the impact.

No one answered at first, though Sato hadn't really expected them to. His theory that George might have made a mistake had taken root, entrenching itself deeper into his heart, sickening him. Freezing to death didn't sound like the best way to go.

But it wasn't long before something scraped on the other side of the door, followed by a loud clunk of metal against metal. Sato stepped back as the door slowly swung inward, the wind blowing wispy trails of snow into the dark interior of the mountain. He braced his feet, held his hands up in defense, not having any idea of what might lunge at him from the gloom.

“What's that?” a raspy voice called out. A pale face appeared, ghoulish with sunken cheeks, like a ghost peeking from beyond the grave. “What's that, I say?” The man's whitish eyes darted about. Sato was surprised the light from outside wasn't blinding him.

“I'm . . .” Then it hit Sato—he had absolutely no idea what to say. “I . . . my name is Sato, and I'm looking for someone.”

“What's that?” the man repeated, stepping forward to reveal his whole body—rail-thin with tattered, filthy clothes hanging on by threads. His eyes still hadn't settled on Sato. “Lookin' for someone, are ya? What, you one of them Snarkies? Come to help, have you? No help for the Loons—too late for that, I can promise ya.”

The initial shock of seeing an insane asylum on top of a mountain having finally worn off, Sato's hopes lifted. George had sent him to the perfect place to find people who'd gone crazy. Now, if he could just get inside, get a blood sample, and get out. But how would he know if his target patient was *normal* crazy or Reginald-Chu-plague-infected crazy?

Sato felt his courage building. “I'm looking for someone. I want to visit him. He's one of the people who got sick recently—went insane from the new plague that's been going around.”

“What's that?” the man said, spittle flying from his mouth. “Plague? There's a plague about?”

“Haven't you had a lot of people brought in recently?” Sato asked, trying to fight off the shivers that racked his body.

“Don’t know ’bout brought in.” The man pointed to the treacherous stairs leading down the face of the mountain. “But an awful lot brought *out*, if ya catch my meanin’.”

Sato turned to look at the stone steps, thinking about the man’s words. The sign stated this door was for the execution of inmates—did that mean they threw them off the knife-edged cliff below? Sato felt his stomach twist.

He faced the man again. “May I *please* come in? I’m freezing to death out here.”

“Right, in ya go,” the poor excuse for a guard replied, stepping back and opening the door until it bumped against the stone wall inside. “Beats me how ya got here in the first place, but in ya go, nice and toasty. Lots of Loons in here—not much hope of findin’ your mate, I can tell ya that. Name’s Klink, by the way.”

Sato stepped through the doorway, trying not to show his eagerness too much. “Nice to meet you, uh, Klink.” Though *toasty* wasn’t exactly the word Sato would use to describe the air inside, it sure beat the frigid bite of the outside.

Klink walked down the long, dark tunnel; Sato followed, listening, observing.

“Can’t say as I’ve ever had a stranger knock on that door before,” Klink said. “Only when the Cleaners come back after droppin’ some Loons, that’s all. Quite nice to have a visitor after all these years.”

“They throw crazy people off that cliff down there?” Sato asked. “When they do something bad or what?”

“If they’ve done somethin’ bad, or grown too old, or if they just need more room—whatever tickles them Cleaners’ fancy. They ain’t too particular when it comes to shovin’ off the Loons, ya know.”

They reached the end of the hallway where a small opening led through the stone to a sparsely decorated room: a floor rug, a chair, a filthy mattress. An old kerosene lamp flickered as it burned, somehow making the pathetic place look welcoming.

“Spend most of my days here,” Klink said, looking around with his hands on his hips, proud of his homestead. “Beats the socks off where I used to live, that’s for sure. If anyone ever offers ya to live in a cave full of flying rats, I recommend you say no thanks and move right along.”

“I’ll remember that,” Sato half-mumbled.

“Want to sit a spell? Take a blink or two?”

Sato shook his head. “No, I feel much better now that we’re inside. Could you take me to where they keep the inmates locked up? Maybe where they have the more recent ones?”

“Right, come on then,” Klink said, moving along the hall again. They

reached a metal grid door, which he slid open, a horrible screech piercing Sato's ears. On the other side, a boxy elevator awaited.

"This lift will take you all the way down to the Loons," Klink said as he gestured for Sato to enter. "Down ya go, then."

Sato, fighting his uneasiness, stepped inside and turned to face Klink just as the man slid the grid door shut. His pale eyes peeked through the slits.

"Best stay on your toes," Klink said.

"What do you mean?" Sato replied.

Klink reached through a large space in the door—mangled and jagged like it had been ripped out with teeth—and slammed a lever inside the lift toward the floor. The elevator lurched and slowly started going down, the squeaks and squeals of chains and pulleys filling the air.

"Didn't you know?" As Klink's body seemed to move upward, he called down to Sato just before he was out of sight. "Ent no one locked up 'round here!"

The trip down the dark elevator shaft was long and cold—especially in light of Klink's pronouncement that the crazies weren't locked up at all. Sato's stomach turned queasy from the jostling and bumping of the steel cage. He saw nothing outside the mesh of metal but black stone, heard nothing but the screech of the lift's mechanics. Impossibly, the seconds stretched into minutes, and he thought Klink surely must have sent him to the middle of the Earth.

Without any hint of slowing down, the elevator jolted to a stop, making Sato's knees buckle. He sprawled across the cold mesh floor, biting his tongue when his chin slammed into the hard surface. He quickly pushed himself back to his feet, rubbing his jaw as he stepped forward to look through the lift door.

Another dimly lit carved passageway led into the distance, no sign of anyone nearby. Having expected someone to greet him—crazy or not—he warily reached out to test the sliding door. It pushed aside easily, groaning as Sato slammed the metal mesh all the way open. The sound of the squeal echoed off the stone walls, and any doubt of his arrival was now wiped away. But still, no one came.

He stepped out of the lift, his eyes focused along the dark tunnel since that seemed to be the only place from which someone could appear. He took another step. Another.

And then he heard a scream.

It started low, an eerie moan that rose in pitch, escalating quickly on the creepy scale to a perfect ten. Sato stopped moving to listen, the hairs on his neck stiff as arrows. The sound was the wail of a lost child mixed with the

terrified squeal of an animal in the butchering house. The effect of it bouncing off the walls made it seem like it was coming from every direction at once. Sato felt like getting back into the steel cage of the lift and going back up to safety.

The sound stopped, slicing silent as quickly as if someone had turned off a loud television. Shouts rang out, several voices yelling something incomprehensible—but Sato could clearly hear the anger and the *lunacy* in the voices. Sato's wariness turned into downright terror.

He closed his eyes, breathed, worked to calm himself. His heartbeat slowed; the blood in his veins stopped acting like it was trying to find a way to escape. After a full minute, he opened his eyes and took off his backpack. He rummaged around its contents until he found the packet containing the blood sample kit. There were three syringes in case one of them broke, each with a very long and nasty-looking needle covered with a plastic sheath to prevent unwanted pokes. He'd never been fond of shots, and the sight of the needles made him thankful he'd not be the one getting stuck.

Sato set the syringes on the stone floor, then looked back at the elevator, checking to make sure he knew how it worked. Just inside the cage, the lever Klink had used jutted out of a dented box of rusty steel, slanted toward the ground.

Sato entered the elevator, gripped the lever with both hands, and lifted; he groaned and felt blood rush to his face until the lever finally gave way and snapped up. With a loud clunk the elevator started moving upward. Sato quickly slammed the switch back down. The steel cage jolted to the floor with a metallic boom.

Some escape route, he thought.

He stepped out of the elevator, slung the backpack onto his shoulders, then very carefully put two of the syringes in his left jeans pocket, making sure not to push down on them. The other he held in his right hand, gripped like a dagger, and removed the protective plastic covering. Having no idea what he was about to get into, he had to be ready for quick action. *Stab, extract, run*, he thought.

His only problem—other than perhaps being mauled to death by a bunch of crazy people—was knowing which of the asylum inmates were infected with Chu's mysterious disease and which were simply crazy. They probably wouldn't be too keen on chitchatting about it.

Blowing a breath through his lips, Sato walked forward.

A Sample of Blood

All righty den,” Sally said after taking a long swallow from his water glass. He set it down on the nightstand, then turned his eyes toward Tick. “Your turn.”

Sally had made Paul and Sofia summarize in their own words what he’d come to tell them. He said it was to make sure the gist of it got “nailed up in dem there noggins a’yorn.” As the weight of Sally’s information settled on their shoulders, Tick at least felt some ease in knowing more about what lay behind the craziness of the last few days.

He put his right foot up on his left knee. “Well, we were supposed to be winked to the Realitant Headquarters at the Grand Canyon for a meeting about the weird stuff Reginald Chu is up to. But before that could happen, Chu tricked us and put a device on our arms that hijacked our nanolocators.”

“Which means what, now?” Sally asked, his eyebrows raised.

“That Reginald Chu controls us now. He can track us and wink us wherever he wants to. And there’s not a thing anyone can do about it.”

Sally shook his head in disgust. “Purtin’ near one of da worst things I reckon a man can do. Matter-fact, breakin’ Rule Number 462 bans you from dem there Realitants ’til the day you is deader than a squirrel on a tire’s underbelly.”

“Hey, let Tick finish,” Sofia said. “We need to make sure we all understand everything you told us.”

“Fair ’nuff,” Sally said.

“Anyway,” Tick continued, “you said it looks like Chu is testing us and some other people to see who’s most worthy to help him in a secret project he’s working on. And the project has something to do with a disease or plague that’s making people go crazy in some of the Realities.”

Tick paused, not really wanting to say the next part.

“Get on wid it,” Sally prodded.

“Master George wants us to keep going. He wants *us* to be the ones who make it. He wants us to win Chu’s contest. It’s the only way we can make sure the Realitants get there to stop it—whatever it is.”

After a long pause, Paul said, “You’re the man, Tick. Took Sofia about three hours to say what you just said.”

“Well,” Tick said, “that’s pretty much it, isn’t it? We have to keep going, even though it seems like Chu doesn’t care if we make it or die trying. Not that much fun to think about, let alone talk about.”

Sofia stood from her chair and walked to the window, where she parted the curtain just enough to peek out. “This is so creepy. It was bad enough knowing Master George tracked us last year. Now we’ve got some power-hungry mad scientist controlling our lives. There has to be a way to get rid of those nanolocators, right?”

“Then you’d be missing the point,” Paul said. “Which is shocking considering how long you took to talk about it.”

“I’m not missing the point,” Sofia said as she turned back toward the group. “Even if we could get rid of them, we wouldn’t because we need to keep pretending that we’re trying to win.”

“Not only that,” Tick said. “We need Chu to think we don’t know he’s behind it all.”

“Dang, you kids are plumb smart,” Sally said. “When I’s a youngun like you, I was happier than a crawdaddy at high tide if I could add up my own two feet.”

“I think you’re wrong, Tick,” Paul said, ignoring Sally. “I don’t think Chu gives one flip about what we know. He seems like a ruthless dude who doesn’t care jack-squat about rules or whatever. All he cares about is who’s standing at the end. It doesn’t matter how we get there.”

“Maybe,” Tick said. “But it still seems smarter to play along as much as we can.”

“Say we do make it,” Sofia asked, sitting on the corner of the bed, addressing Sally. “What are we supposed to do once we get there?”

Sally nodded, pausing a long time before he answered. “Dat there’s a dang ol’ good question, miss. I reckon George is tryin’ to figger dat one out as we sit here talkin’.”

“What are *you* going to do?” Paul asked.

“I’ll be gettin’ on back to the homestead,” Sally said, rubbing his hands together. “Ya’ll keep mosin’ along on dis here joyride, and I’ll come find ya when we’s got further word.”

“How are you going to find us? How *did* you find us?” Tick asked.

“I’d reckoned you woulda done asked me dat. Took me forever to find ya the first time ’cuz the signal was weak. But don’t you remember me shovin’ my finger in ya ear?”

Tick couldn’t have forgotten. “Yeah, what was that for?”

“I put one of dem fancy Earwig Transponder thingamajigs in there. Now George can track ya better and stifle some of dem spyin’ devices inside ya.”

Tick reached up and rubbed his ear, then poked his index finger in as deep as it would go. “You put *what* in my ear?”

“Doncha fret, now,” Sally said. “Ain’t like it’s gonna eat your dang ol’

brain or nuttin’.”

Tick was about to protest further when someone rapped on the door with a hard and urgent knock. Sofia and Paul jumped to their feet; Sally moved faster than Tick would have believed—running to the door and yanking it open in a matter of two seconds.

No one stood there, but a note had been stuck to the door with a piece of clear tape. Sally ripped it off, read through the words, then walked over and handed it to Tick.

“Read it,” Sally said. “I’m goin’ to look for the rat who left it.” He left the room, marching like he was going off to war.

Tick shot a glance at Paul and Sofia, then read the note to them. ““You people must think I’m an idiot. But I know everything. Everything. The sooner you accept that, the better. The game is on. Win or die.”” Tick paused, swallowed. ““Sincerely, Reginald Chu.””

No one said a word for the longest time. Finally, Sofia spoke: “Looks like you were right, Paul.”

Win or die, Tick thought. *Win or die*.

The sounds grew louder—and more haunting—as Sato made his way down the long tunnel. A man screaming as if going through a horrible surgery without anesthetic. People arguing, their words impossible to make out. Someone crying. *Lots* of people crying. Mumbling, moaning, retching. Sato couldn’t imagine anything worse than being in this place.

The roughly carved walls of the tunnel were dark and shiny, wet with rivulets and flat streams of water sluicing down its sides, disappearing into cracks on the floor. Odd lamps were set into the stone about every thirty feet, filthy glass surrounding a milky light that seemed a mix of old-fashioned wicks and electric sparks. Sato fully expected to see rats scurrying about, but thus far had seen no sign of life.

Just the sounds. The terrible, terrible sounds.

Up ahead, the tunnel made a turn to the right, a somewhat brighter light glowing from that direction. Huddled on the floor was a woman, her face draped in shadow, clutching her legs to her chest, shivering and mumbling the same phrase over and over. Sato couldn’t quite make out the words.

His heart pounded as he walked toward the woman, sweat making the syringe clasped in his right hand slippery; he hid it behind his back. Was she infected? Could it be this easy? He stopped a few feet in front of her, thinking about each breath, trying to slow his heart down.

“Excuse me,” he said, his voice breaking on the second word. He cleared his throat. “Excuse me, I’m looking for someone.”

The woman looked up; Sato took a step backward. He didn't know what he'd expected to see—someone hideous, scarred, a wart-infested witch, maybe—but the lady sitting in front of him was very pretty. She had perfect skin, and blue eyes that shone like crystals in the pale light. Her dark hair sprawled across her shoulders. White teeth flashed behind her still-moving lips, uttering the indecipherable words repeatedly.

Despite her pleasant looks, she looked sad, tear streaks lining both cheeks.

"Can you help me?" Sato said, fingering the syringe hidden from her sight. He took a step closer.

The woman finally fell silent, pressing her lips together. Then she spoke, her voice soft but firm. "We're only crazy when he's not in our heads."

Sato reached for words to reply. The lady's eyes showed no lunacy, no fear, no confusion. She seemed perfectly sane.

"What do you mean?" he finally asked.

"My name is Renee," she replied, ignoring his question. "But right now he is in my head, and I will do whatever he says."

"I don't know what you mean," Sato said, taking a step back.

Renee stood up. Her beauty shined despite tattered, dirty garments. She was short and thin, but held herself with confidence—back straight, shoulders square, chin up.

"Why has George sent you here?" she asked.

Sato took another step backward, this time bumping into the stone wall across from the woman. "How . . . how do you know—"

"Stop acting the fool, young man. I know everything. I'm Reginald Chu, and I find it very interesting that you've come here, to this strange place, with a syringe in your hand. *Why?*"

Sato pulled his right hand from behind his back, looking down at it as if ashamed. He didn't know which felt worse right then—his head or his stomach. "I don't understand. What do you mean you're Reginald Chu?"

"I think I'm the one who doesn't understand," Renee replied. "George seems to know so much about my project, yet here you stand, without the slightest clue of the danger you are in. How can you trust such a leader?"

"Nothing you say makes sense."

"Everything I say makes sense." Renee crossed the short span of the tunnel, stopping directly in front of Sato. "Once I have my partner, once Dark Infinity is fully functional, you'll understand. The Realities are about to have a great change, my friend."

Sato swallowed, trying to build his courage. "You're crazy, lady. You think Reginald Chu is controlling you somehow. Don't you see how crazy that is? You need help."

“I told you,” Renee said with a sneer. “We’re not crazy until he leaves our heads.”

“My boss—he thinks he can find a cure for you. If you’ll just let me . . .” He held the syringe up, raising his eyebrows in question.

“A cure?” Renee backed off two steps, shaking her head. “A *cure*? Does that man think I’m a toady research assistant at some under-funded university? He thinks he’s going to stop me with a *cure*? He’ll sooner cure cancer, Parkinson’s, diabetes, and regenerate amputated limbs before he’ll stop Dark Infinity.”

Confusion swarmed like a pack of bees inside Sato’s head. The lady really and truly thought she was Reginald Chu. And it worried Sato that he was sliding toward that same belief as well. “What is Dark Infinity?”

Renee folded her arms. “As they say in your Reality, that’s on a need-to-know basis and you don’t need to know. A cure. Ha.” She barked a laugh.

“If you’re so confident, why not give me a blood sample? And then I’ll leave.”

Renee held out her hand to him. “Come with me,” she said. “I want to give you a taste of what Dark Infinity will become. And then I want you to go back and report it to your buffoon of a leader. All the Realitant do-gooders can then have fun dreading the day I take over their lives.”

Sato shook his head. “Give me a sample first. Then I’ll go.”

Renee stared at him for a long minute, her blue eyes seeming to glow. “You’re brave for someone so young. Maybe you should have been included in my special trials. Of course, I need a lot more than bravery—too bad you’re not more like your friend Atticus Higginbottom.”

Sato almost fell to the ground at the mention of Tick. This lady had no way, absolutely no way of knowing anything about Tick or the strange ability he’d displayed in the Thirteenth Reality. “How do you know about him?”

“Come with me.” She beckoned again with her hand.

“The sample first.” Sato wiped sweat from his brow, thinking too late how much weakness the action probably showed. “You said yourself there’s no way George can find a cure.”

“Yes, I did say that. But I’m not an idiot—I won’t take chances. This isn’t some lame movie from your Hollywood.”

Sato steeled his nerves. “I’m not going anywhere until you give me a blood sample. You may think you have Reginald Chu inside your head, but I bet he won’t be much help in a wrestling match between us.”

Renee laughed, such a pleasant sound in the otherwise dreary place that it disturbed Sato.

“A compromise, then,” she said. Or *Chu* said. “I’ll give you your sample,

but you let me carry the vial until we're done. I want—no, I *need* you to report back to George what you see here today.”

“No way,” Sato said. “I’m not giving you the vial.”

Renee’s face creased into a scowl so frightening that Sato would have melted into the stone at his back if he could have. “You tire me, boy. Do you really think I’m going to let you leave here alive with a sample of my blood? You’ll be signing your own death warrant.”

Sato felt his own blood chill. *George will get me out*, he thought. *George will get me out.*

“I’ll take my chances,” he said. “Give me your blood and I’ll go with you.”

Renee stuck her arm out. “Do it, then.”

Sato stepped forward and grabbed her thin arm, leaning over to look at the soft skin in the bend of her elbow. A big vein pulsed, purple in the faint light.

“This might hurt,” he said, not sure why he showed any compassion. “I’ve never done this before.”

“Just do it. Nothing you do to me will be worse than when *he* leaves my head.”

As Sato readied the syringe, the needle only an inch from the vein, he looked up at Renee’s face. “Sometimes you talk like you’re this Chu guy, and sometimes like yourself. You really are crazy.”

“You wouldn’t understand unless you were infected. Stick me.”

Sato held his breath, then jammed the needle into Renee’s vein. He quickly pulled back on the syringe pump, relieved to see dark red fluid fill the plastic vial. He finished, pulled out the needle, then replaced the plastic cover. He put the whole thing into his right pocket. He put a bandage on her arm to stop the bleeding.

“Done,” he said, finally taking in a huge breath like he’d just surfaced after diving for oysters.

“That blood will never see the light of day; you understand that, right? The only way you will leave this mountain is by giving it up.”

“Just show me what you wanted to show me.” Half of him wanted to push her down and run for the elevator, but he knew he couldn’t. George would desperately need any information he could gather in his quest to find a cure or antidote.

“This way.” She walked toward a branch of the tunnel leading to the right, but paused after a couple of steps and turned toward Sato, her face devoid of expression. “What you’re about to see, you’ll never forget. Never. I promise you.”

Trapped

With each step down the wet and musty passage of stone, the noises around Sato grew in volume. The screams and wails and shouts and piercing cries for help made him feel as if invisible bugs were crawling across his skin, trying to find a place to burrow toward his heart. His stomach clenched into a tight wad of tissue. He braced himself for the sight ahead, wondering if he'd ever see George or Mothball or Rutger or his other friends again.

They reached a place where a dirty curtain was stretched across the entire width of the hallway, swaying slightly from a breeze behind it. The awful sounds became ear-piercing, no longer muffled by distance. Sato was now only a few feet away from discovering whatever was wrong with these people.

“Prepare yourself,” Renee said. Then she reached out and yanked the curtain to the side.

For the second time in the last hour, Sato's knees buckled. He fell to the ground, his shins slamming onto the hard stone as he stared at the chaos in front of him.

The passageway opened into a large chamber, tables and chairs scattered about the raggedy carpet, most of them broken or turned upside down. Hundreds of people—horrible, terrified, creepy-looking people—filled the room in a state of utter madness.

Their clothes were torn; bloody scrapes and gashes covered their bodies; big splotches of hair had been ripped from their heads. They attacked each other at random, moving from one to the other without warning. They coughed and spit and snarled and bit anything in sight. They cried one second, laughed the next, then screamed as if their very throats would burst. They climbed the walls until they fell crashing to the floor. They jumped and huddled and kicked and flailed their arms.

It was, without any doubt, the most horrific thing Sato had ever witnessed, and he knew he would spend the rest of his life trying to purge it from his memory.

“What is this?” He had to force the words out, rage clogging his throat. “What's wrong with them? How could you do this to them!”

Renee knelt on the floor next to him, not taking her eyes off the mayhem before them. “So you believe me now, do you? You believe that he's inside my head, controlling me, talking to you? That I am Reginald Chu at this moment?”

“I don’t care who you are,” Sato said. “I’ll spend the rest of my life making you pay for it.”

Renee tsk-tsked as she shook her head. “Hard to believe you’re only a young man—you speak more like an adult than most men I know.” She shifted until she was sitting comfortably with her legs crossed beneath her. “But this isn’t what I *really* wanted to show you. Let me show you the future.”

Sato finally tore his eyes from the sickening display and looked at Renee. “What?” he said, throwing all the hatred he could into the word.

Renee didn’t return his stare, looking instead at the people around them. “They’re like this because I underestimated the power of Dark Infinity. I can’t control it on my own—I need help. I need a partner.”

She pushed herself to her feet and walked forward, seemingly oblivious to the danger she entered. But then, as if spurred by the flip of a switch, every person in the vast room grew silent, freezing in place. After a few seconds, the people—every single one of them—calmly gained their composure and joined Renee in the middle of the chamber, lining up in perfectly straight rows. The formation filled the floor, as ordered and organized as any military group in the world. Not a sound could be heard as they all stood still, each one staring at Sato.

“He is in all of our heads, now,” Renee called out, standing rigid as she spoke. “We will do his bidding, whatever he asks, until that time he must leave us, and then we will return to the horror that is life without him. The day comes when he will never leave us again.”

Sato slowly got to his feet, nausea and despair threatening to consume him. In the understatement of his young life, he told himself he had seen enough.

“I’m sorry he’s doing this to you,” he half-whispered. “Fight it if you can. I promise we’ll try to save you.”

He didn’t wait for a response. He turned and ran.

Behind him, he heard the piercing cry of Renee’s voice, echoing up and through the air as if she’d used a bullhorn. “He has my blood in his right pocket! Don’t let him leave with it!”

And then came the sound of hundreds of people running and screaming in a synchronized cry of pursuit.

“Can you pull him out yet?” Master George asked for the twentieth time in the last ten minutes, pacing the floor of the command room.

“No,” Rutger replied, his eyes riveted to the nanolocator monitor. “But his heart rate is spiking again—I didn’t think it could possibly get higher, but now it’s in the danger zone.” In his hands, Rutger held the Barrier Wand,

programmed to wink Sato back from the mountaintop.

“Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear,” Master George whispered under his breath.

“Should’ve gone with ’im, I should,” Mothball said from her chair in the corner. “Bugger, I should’ve ruddy gone with ’im.”

Master George stopped, turning toward his tall friend. “Perhaps, my good Mothball, perhaps. However, we all agreed that this was the perfect opportunity for Sato to snap out of the haze of his past and find himself. If you were there to save him, he might never truly join us.”

“He needs to make it back to the execution cliff,” Rutger said. “Until then, there’s nothing I can do.”

“He’ll make it,” Master George said. “I know it. And when he returns, he’ll truly be a Realitant, the shade of his parents’ death no longer a crutch to bind him in shadow.”

“Very poetic,” Rutger muttered. “But the way his heart’s racing, we’ll need to give him a transplant as soon as he gets back.”

“Just keep that Wand ready, Rutger. Keep it ready.”

Sato gasped for breath as he ran through the dimly lit tunnel; it hadn’t seemed so long the first time he’d walked through its winding path. The escalating screams behind him brought horrible images to his mind of what would happen if he were caught. Every muscle in his body begged him to stop, but he kept running, limping slightly from the pain in his shins, especially on his right leg.

Worried the blood-filled syringe in his right pocket might break, he reached in and pulled it out, gripping the plastic cylinder once again like a dagger in his hand. It almost slipped from the sweat on his palm—he shifted it to his left hand while he wiped his fingers dry, then switched back.

He kept running.

He turned a corner and saw the elevator up ahead, its steel cage open and ready for him. He could see the lever mechanism inside the sliding mesh door. He was almost safe.

The hollow echoes of his pursuers bounced through the tunnel like thunder crackling along open plains. Sato heard noises of feet stomping on stone, kicked rocks, heavy breathing, grunts. He heard Renee shout something; he couldn’t make out the words, but the intensity of the screams jumped a notch.

Sato looked over his shoulder and saw the pack of crazies only thirty feet behind him and gaining ground. Renee led them, her eyes focused, her hoard of followers on her tail, waving their arms, shaking their fists. It was like the villagers chasing Frankenstein’s monster—the only things missing were pitchforks and torches.

Sato faced forward again; so close, the elevator was only a few feet away. He reached up, slipped the backpack off his left shoulder, then his right, still running, still holding tight to the blood sample.

He windmilled his left arm and threw the backpack forward. It landed with a thud in the back corner of the elevator just as he crossed the threshold of the cage. He reached out with his free hand and slid the door shut with a squeal and a clank as it landed home. The latch to close it was small and weak—Sato knew it wouldn't last long. He closed it anyway then knelt on the floor and pushed up on the lever with his shoulder, screaming with the effort until the thing finally snapped into position.

With a lurch, the elevator started moving upward just as Renee and dozens of the screaming mob slammed into the cage, clawing at the steel, screaming and spitting. Hundreds of scabby fingers squirmed through the small openings, some of the crazies climbing onto the elevator, others violently pulling and pushing on the door. Sato scrambled to the far corner, staring at the sickening sight.

The elevator had only gone up a few feet when dozens more of his pursuers crawled beneath it and gripped the floor through the checkered holes, hanging on, pulling toward the ground. The cage slowed to a stop, the weight of the people too great. Sato knew if he could make it to the narrow shaft cut into the stone above, then the psychos clinging to the side would have no choice but to let go or be crushed to death. He jumped to his feet, kicking at the fingers below him, stomping repeatedly in a ridiculous dance, watching in triumph as those he smashed let go and fell to the floor.

The elevator stuttered and paused, screams coming from above as the topmost section entered the main elevator shaft and crushed several of the inmates who still clung to the side. The cage slowed again, and Sato closed his eyes before he could see the gruesome results. He heard the thumps of bodies on the stone below, and the elevator lurched upward again, regaining its normal speed.

Please, he thought. Please be over, please let me go home.

A wrenching click of steel made his eyes pop open just as the door to the cage slid open with a screech. Renee had somehow broken the latch, squeezing her body against the elevator until she could get it open. She and Sato were alone, having left everyone else below, their wails and cries already dying out with the distance.

“Almost made it, didn't you?” Renee said, her chest heaving with her deep breaths.

Sato reached down and pulled the plastic cover off the blood-filled syringe, then held it out like a knife. “Stay back,” he said, bending his knees in a crouch. “There's no way you can win a fight with me.”

“You still don’t get it, do you?” she replied. They circled, each staying as far apart from the other as possible in the small cage. “He’s in my head. I’ll do whatever he asks.”

“Why are you doing this?” Sato asked.

“I told you, he’s in my—”

“Not you!” Sato screamed. “Reginald Chu! Why are you doing this!”

“If you have to ask, then you’ll never understand why.”

Renee lunged forward, surprising Sato despite his stance. She crashed into him, slamming his back against the side of the cage. On instinct, Sato stuck the needle into her back. She cried out in pain then lashed out at his face, scraping her nails across his right cheek. Sato pulled out the needle and bent his knees, letting his body fall to the floor, Renee landing on top of him.

They rolled and wrestled, Renee punching and clawing like a panicked bear. Sato had the syringe under her, pointed it at her face, trying to threaten her because he didn’t know what else to do. She grabbed his hand, thrusting the needle away, twisting his wrist so the syringe was heading toward his own skin. He couldn’t believe her strength. He groaned with effort, but she kept winning, pushing the needle closer and closer to the soft skin of his lower neck.

He pushed her away with a final burst of exertion; she surprised him by pulling back instead of fighting it. Caught off guard, his grip on the syringe slipped and Renee yanked it free. She twisted backward and pressed the point of the needle against his leg.



“You . . . had . . . your . . . chance,” she spit out, her face red with exertion and anger as she drove the needle *into* Sato’s skin. He felt the prick, the achy

slide of the sharp sliver of metal. Then Renee slammed downward on the plunger of the syringe.

Pain exploded through Sato's body as the needle dug in deeper, as the blood sample rushed into him. He cried out as the syringe emptied, its infected contents now swimming inside his tissue and veins. It felt like millions of tiny bugs squirmed underneath his skin.

"No!" he screamed, a surge of adrenaline giving him the strength to throw Renee off his body completely. "NO!"

He scrambled to his feet, unable to stop the tears from flowing as pain racked his body. "What . . . what . . . have you done to me?"

"You'll be one of us now," Renee said, crouched in the corner with a smile on her face.

"No, I won't. Never."

The elevator slammed to a stop.

"What the devil's goin' on here?"

Sato looked over to see Klink, his eyes moving back and forth between Sato and Renee, surprise and concern on his face.

Sato didn't hesitate. He grabbed his backpack, ran from the lift cage, down the tunnel, and toward the steel door that led outside. He ran.

"Go, then!" Renee called out from behind him. "It won't matter—you'll be mine anyway. Run and take me to Master George. It'll be fun to have a spy —"

Sato didn't hear the rest. He was through the door, squinting his eyes against the blinding snow, scrambling down the stone stairway, slipping and falling and not caring.

Down the mountain he went.

"I've got him!" Rutger yelled.

He pushed the golden button on top of the Barrier Wand, and Sato appeared in front of them. The boy collapsed to the ground, a terrible mess of blood and dirt and torn clothing, sweat-ice crusted all over him.

"Goodness gracious me!" Master George yelled as he and Mothball reached forward to help Sato. They grabbed him by the arms and pulled him over to a leather chair, plopping his exhausted body onto the cushions.

"What happened?" Mothball asked.

Sato answered, his voice shaky and barely audible. "Lock . . . me . . . up. Chain me. Then . . . I'll explain."

"Lock you—" Rutger began.

"Just do it!" Sato snapped, his hand pressed to a wound on his leg. "Just do

it before Chu can control me!”

“What happened?” Master George asked, leaning over to look at the boy. “Did you get the sample?”

“Yes,” Sato said through a moan of pain. His eyes narrowed, like a wolf on the hunt. “It’s . . . *inside* me.”

“Oh, lad. Oh, you poor, poor lad.” Master George paused. Then he straightened, his shoulders square. “Ready the holding cell, Rutger. And get me some rope.”

Part 3

The Circle Of Time

Tickets to Fourth City

I'm really getting sick of this place," Paul said.

Tick couldn't have agreed more as he scanned the walls and ceiling of the small restaurant where they had stopped to eat something that was a cross between pizza and toast. Five days had passed since Sally winked back to Master George, and they'd spent every waking hour investigating the town for signs of where they were supposed to be at five o'clock the next afternoon. Though they didn't know what they were looking for, they looked nonetheless.

And, just like this place—one of the last buildings they'd yet to explore—they'd found nothing. No signs, no clues, no Barrier Wands, no magic portals, no further riddles. A big fat zero.

And time was running out. Reginald Chu's riddle had been clear—5:00 pm, tomorrow. Maybe they'd finally been stumped.

"Maybe it's a good thing if we don't figure it out," Paul said. "Beats going off to have more adventures with a psycho mad genius of the universe."

"He said, 'win or die,'" Sofia said. "Dying sounds worse to me."

Tick picked up his last piece of dinner, but then put it back down, his appetite gone. "Sally said we need to be the ones to win it—so we can put a stop to whatever Chu's doing."

"Yeah, and I'm sure that'll be a piece of cake," Paul muttered. "Hey, Chu dude! We won, but please stop that knuckleheaded horseplay you're up to. Thanks kindly."

"You want to give up?" Sofia asked. "Then quit. I'm sure Master George will wink you away if you cry enough."

"No, Miss Italy, I don't want to quit. Someone has to protect you." Paul leaned back and rubbed his belly. "Man, that was pretty good."

"Come on," Sofia said as she got up from her chair. "It's our last night—we'd better get searching."

They searched until well past dark. They looked on every corner, behind every bush, under every sidewalk bench. They walked the underground pathways of the train stations again. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Even the trains seemed to avoid them; they'd yet to actually see one despite several trips to the stations.

Tick thought about quitting more than once that night, but the urgency of

the dwindling time spurred him on, despite his exhaustion. Finally, a roving policeman told them they needed to get off the streets, that curfew was far past. Sofia complained, but the officer made it clear they'd get one warning and one warning only.

And so they went back to the hotel, back to their beds.

Tick set his watch alarm for 6:00, but he had no idea what he'd do when he woke up. Imagining the glowing monkeys prowling the woods outside his window, he fell asleep.

His alarm had just sounded when he heard someone knock at the door. It was Sofia, dragging a sleepy-eyed Paul behind her.

"We need to get out there," she said. "We only have eleven hours left."

"But what are we going to *do*?" Paul asked. "We've looked everywhere. There's no point in looking anymore. We're just as well off staying here."

"Well, we have to do something!" Sofia insisted.

Tick groaned as he flopped back on his bed. "I'm with Paul on this one. All we've figured out is that something is supposed to happen at five o'clock. At this point, running around the town makes no more sense than sitting here, holding hands and chanting to the time gods."

"Chanting to the time gods?" Paul asked. "Tick, you're losing it."

Sofia huffed as she took a seat. "Then *think*. What are we missing?"

No one answered, and they all remained silent for several minutes.

Paul snapped his fingers. "The last line of the riddle says, 'Make sure your feet find the air,' right? Well, maybe we're supposed to catch a train and go somewhere *else* by five o'clock. Someplace called 'air' or something like that."

"Hmm," Sofia said. "That's possible. The whole underground railroad system is kind of weird. There must be something about this place, a reason he sent us here—maybe it *is* the train!"

"I'll admit it's better than chanting to the time gods," Tick said. "Let's go."

The streets were surprisingly busy for so early in the morning; most of the people out and about were heading down the stairs that led to the underground railroad.

"These people must all work in another city," Tick said. "No wonder they have to leave when the sun comes up."

"Good thing we're not the only ones awake," Paul said. "I didn't want that cop barking at us again."

They followed the crowd to the ticket counters, old-fashioned brick windows where old men took money and gave out printed slips of paper. Holding some of the local currency given to them by Phillip, they waited their turn.

“Next!” a white-haired man called out, a scowl scrunching up his face like he was having a kidney removed.

Sofia stepped up first. “We’d like three tickets for . . . a train.”

Somehow, the man’s face screwed up even tighter. “Well, that’s real nice to know you have that figured out, missy. How about telling me *where* you want to go?”

“Oh.” Sofia looked back at Tick, who shrugged.

“How many trains are leaving soon?” Paul asked.

“What kind of a fool question is that?” the old man grunted. “As many as you’d like. As few as you want. Now are you going buy a ticket or not?”

Just when I thought it couldn’t get any weirder, Tick thought.

“What are our options?” Sofia asked. “We’re tourists, and just want to do some exploring.”

“Oh, well isn’t that just peachy?” the man replied, rolling his eyes under his bushy white brows. “Good thing you got me, kids. One of the grumpy ticket masters would’ve sent you walking already.”

Tick could sense that something smart was about to fly out of Sofia’s mouth, so he kicked her gently on the calf.

“Please just give us our options,” she said instead.

“From this station, you can go to Martyrtown, Cook Reef, Falcon Bay, or Fourth City. Now choose and be done with it.”

“Okay, please give me just one second, sir,” Sofia said, so gushy polite that Tick was sure the man would kick them out for being smart alecks.

“Did you hear that?” Paul whispered. “He said Fourth City.”

“That’s the number of Chu’s Reality!” Tick said.

“Bingo,” Paul said.

“You really think that’s it?” Sofia asked, staring at the floor as if deep in thought. She finally nodded to herself and turned toward the old man. “Three tickets to Fourth City, please.”

“Well, congratulations on making a decision. I hope you have a swell time. That’ll be thirty-four yecterns.”

“Oh,” Paul said to the man as Sofia handed over the money. “Make sure we’ll be there by five o’clock.”

The ticket master printed out three tickets from a rickety metallic machine and handed them over the counter. “Boy, say one more snide remark and I’ll have the police boot you out of here. Now go.”

“Sir,” Paul replied, sounding more sincere than Tick had ever heard him before. “I promise I’m not trying to be difficult—we just don’t understand how the trains work here. And we need to be there by five o’clock.”

The man frowned deeper than ever, then looked at each of them in turn. “You three are just about the strangest kids I’ve ever seen. You go over to the portal that matches the number on your ticket”—he pointed at a series of large white cubicles—“step inside, and it’ll take you from there.”

“But—” Paul started.

“Go!” The ticket master’s face reddened as he pointed toward the booths.

Like three startled mice, they scuttled away. Tick hoped he never had to talk to the man again.

When they were sufficiently far enough away from the old buzzard, Sofia handed out the tickets.

Tick took his ticket. Printed in faded black letters as if the ink were running out in the old guy’s machine were the words, “Portal Number Seven. Fourth City. Round Trip.”

“Well, let’s go,” Paul said. “Hopefully we’ll get there in time to search around.”

The portals—tall, rectangular cubicles, white and shiny—were lined up in order along the sunken line of what Tick had thought were train tracks. He peeked into the ten-foot-deep trench and saw a series of long, metal rods stretching into a dark tunnel at the end of the station.

“Come on,” Paul said, holding open the door. It was made out of the same material as the rest of the small building and fitted to match its shape.

Sofia went in first, then Tick, then Paul, who closed the door behind him.

The inside was a perfect cylinder, completely covered in thick, rubbery padding that was a burnt-orange color. Along the bottom, a bench protruded from the walls—also covered in soft padding—making a circle for the passengers to sit and stare at each other.

“This is a train?” Tick asked no one in particular. An uneasy feeling crept into his bones.

“What do we—” Paul began, but was cut off by an electronic woman’s voice coming from unseen speakers.

“*Please present your tickets,*” it said, a soft monotonous tone that made Tick feel sleepy. He clasped his ticket between his thumb and forefinger, holding it up into the air; the others did the same.

“*Cleared. State your desired time of departure.*”

“As soon as possible,” Sofia said in a loud voice.

“It’s not deaf,” Paul whispered, getting an elbow in the gut from Sofia in return.

“Checking departures. One moment, please.” A pause, then: *“Six Forty-Four is acceptable. Please stand on the foot rest, backs against the wall.”*

“Huh?” Paul asked.

“Just do it,” Sofia said, climbing on to the bench.

“Three minutes to departure.”

Tick stepped onto the padded bench, surprised at how firmly it held him. He rested his back against the soft wall; Paul and Sofia had done the same, the three of them spaced evenly apart, exchanging worried glances.

“This is weird,” Paul said.

“That about sums it up,” Tick agreed.

“It’s obviously okay. All those other people are doing it,” Sofia said. “We can’t expect every Reality to be just like ours.”

“One minute to departure.”

“What do we do—just stand here?” Paul asked.

Sofia rolled her eyes. “You can do jumping jacks if you want.”

“You’re telling me you’re not a little scared?”

“I am,” Tick said.

“Maybe a little,” Sofia said.

“Thirty seconds to departure.”

No one said a word after that; Tick counted down inside his head.

“Ten seconds.” A pause. *“Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Departure initiated.”*

The room began to rotate clockwise, slowly at first, but then it picked up speed.

“Oh, no,” Tick said. “I can’t do this—I’ll throw up all over you guys.”

They spun faster and faster. Tick felt a pressure on his skin, squeezing his limbs and his torso, like an invisible force pushing him against the curved wall at his back. In a matter of seconds, he’d lost track of their rotation speed, his mind and stomach disoriented, his body sinking into the padding. His thoughts whirled as fast as his body, spinning clockwise in a tight circle.

Something clicked in Tick’s mind.

He envisioned the city they’d just left, the layout, the circular road—and the solution to Chu’s riddle crystallized in his head, as clear as anything he’d ever known. In that moment, he knew they shouldn’t be on the train.

They had to stop. *They had to go back!*

He wanted to say something, but he couldn’t. He felt like the world was crushing him. Grunting, he tried to push his arms up into the air. It felt like he had fifty-pound dumbbells in his hands. The second he relaxed, his arms slammed back onto the wall.

Then it got worse.

A horn sounded, coming from everywhere and nowhere at once, and then the room *shifted*. With the spinning and the pressure, it was hard to tell which direction the room was moving, but it seemed to have dropped into a black hole, catapulting forward at a speed that was too much for Tick's mind and body to handle.

He passed out.

Forest Exit

Tick.”

He heard someone say his name, but it sounded hollow, like an echo coming down a long tunnel.

“Tick!”

There it was again. Louder this time. A sharp pain splintered across his mind, and that seemed to do the trick. Groaning, blinking through squinting eyes, he woke up.

“Dude, are you all right?”

Paul. It was Paul.

“Come on. Help him up.”

Sofia.

Tick felt hands grip him by the arms and haul him off the floor, setting him down on a soft bench. Every time he opened his eyes, all he could see were things spinning and rocking back and forth. His mind felt like a pack of termites had been set loose inside for lunch. And the nausea . . .

“I gotta throw up,” he whispered.

“Not on me, you don’t,” Paul said. “Hurry, let’s get him out of here.”

They grabbed him by the arms again. He heard a door open, felt refreshing cool air wash over him as they helped him stumble outside the portal.

“There’s a garbage can,” he heard Sofia say; they changed directions.

“Hurry,” Tick groaned, trying his best to get his feet under him. A cold line of metal pressed against his neck.

“Go for it,” Paul muttered.

Tick let it all out, then slid to the ground and leaned back against the garbage can. “Ah, that feels much better.” He opened his eyes fully and got his first good look at where they’d arrived.

The station looked much like the one they’d left earlier—maybe a little dirtier, less well-kept. Just as many people milled about, though, some leaving portals, some entering them.

“What happened?” he asked.

“You passed out,” Sofia said. “I think I might have, too, just for a few seconds. When we finally stopped, Paul and I slid down onto the bench, but you crashed straight to the floor.”

“Yeah, man,” Paul said. “You were out like a light.”

“How long were we in that thing?” Tick asked.

Sofia looked at her watch. “Only a half-hour or so.”

“Worst half-hour of my life,” Paul said.

Tick rubbed his face with both hands, then stood up, wobbling for a second before he felt his legs strengthen and solidify beneath him. “We have to go back. Now.”

“Go back?” Paul asked. “Are you crazy?”

“We need to look around,” Sofia said. “Figure out what Chu wants us to do.”

Tick shook his head, which sent another wave of nausea through his gut. “No, we got it wrong. We weren’t supposed to come here. The trains have nothing to do with the riddle.”

“How do you know?” Paul asked. “Fourth City—it’s the closest we’ve gotten to anything that makes sense.”

Tick started walking toward the ticket counter. Paul and Sofia followed, but they didn’t look happy. “Our tickets are round trip—does that mean we just get back on Portal Number Seven?”

“Whoa, man,” Paul said, grabbing Tick by the arm. “Tell us what you’re thinking. If we’re getting back in that death machine, we need to at least let our brains unscramble for a minute.”

Tick nodded, anxious to leave but knowing Paul was right. He found a bench and they sat down, Tick in the middle.

“All right,” he said. “Think about everything. The town Chu sent us to is a perfect circle. We counted *twelve* main roads that are basically spokes in the huge wheel of how the place is organized. Even the hotel he set us up in—it’s called The Stroke of Midnight Inn. You gettin’ it yet?”

“Holy toothpick on a hand grenade,” Paul whispered.

“I don’t think I’ve ever felt as stupid as I feel right now,” Sofia said.

“It never had anything to do with an actual *time*,” Tick continued. “It was such an easy riddle because he wanted to throw us off track. We were so sure something had to happen at five o’clock today, we never considered that he might be describing a *place*.”

Paul finished for him. “If we look at the town from a bird’s-eye view, it’s a big clock. Our hotel is midnight—twelve o’clock. We need to go to the road that represents *five* o’clock.”

“But we already looked there,” Sofia said. “We scoured that whole town.”

Tick stretched his arms, feeling better already. “Yeah, but we had so much area to cover, we didn’t really have time to study anything in detail. I bet we find something where the five o’clock road hits the outer circle.”

“Ah, man, what if we’re too late?” Paul asked. “If you’re right, maybe we didn’t have to wait a week. Maybe we should’ve gone to the place a lot

sooner.”

Sofia stood up. “Maybe it’s a double riddle.”

“You’re right,” Tick said. “I bet we have to be at the five o’clock road *by* five o’clock today.”

“Well, then,” Paul said, “we have plenty of time. Let’s go get something to eat.”

“No way,” Tick said. “You really think it’s going to be that easy? Something will try to stop us, I guarantee it.”

“Well, we have to *eat*,” Paul insisted.

“Yeah, but we should get back to Circle City first,” Sofia said. “The sooner the better.”

All of them slowly turned their heads to look at the spinning nightmare train from which they’d just exited. Tick couldn’t think of anything he’d rather *not* do than get back on that thing.

“We have to do it,” Sofia said, as if reading Tick’s thoughts.

“I know,” Tick replied.

“Yeah, eating right now would be really stupid,” Paul said. “I don’t want Tick’s bacon and eggs on my lap when we get there.”

“Come on,” Sofia said. “Let’s figure out how to get back.”

They had to wait only twenty minutes for Portal Number Seven to open up for the return trip to Circle City. Tick had never felt so nervous about a trip before; butterflies swarmed in his chest like it was mating season. He remembered his mom lecturing him at the amusement park: “*Now, Atticus, you know what the Spinning Dragon does to your poor tummy.*”

“*One minute to departure,*” the nice electronic lady said.

Tick squeezed his eyes shut, pressed his back against the soft padding. *Thirty-minute trip*, he told himself. *It’s only thirty minutes.*

The warning for thirty seconds sounded, then ten, then the five-second countdown. When the room started spinning, Tick opened his eyes to look at Paul and Sofia, both of whom were trying to look very calm but failing miserably. This made Tick feel better, and he closed his eyes again.

The portal spun faster and faster, twisting like a tornado, throwing all of his senses into chaos as the invisible force once again pushed him into the padding, pressing against his body. He held his breath, anticipating the explosion of speed—reminding him of how he felt that split-second before the free-fall ride at the Seattle amusement park dropped fifteen stories to the ground far below. But this was far worse.

The horn sounded.

Tick tried to scream as the train exploded into instant acceleration, shocking his mind as it bulleted away from Fourth City. He didn't know if any noise escaped his throat. Nothing seemed to be working inside his brain, all of his nerves dead to the world, confused and compressed.

He felt himself sliding away again, moving toward the bliss of unconsciousness. *Do it*, he thought. *Pass out. Anything is better than this.* He faded in and out, feeling like every second lasted an hour. He had no idea how much time had passed when everything suddenly went wrong.

The train jerked, a quick and loud jolt as if they'd hit a cow on the tracks like the steamers in the old days. Then the room shook, rattling up and down, creaks and groans ripping through the air, as if the whole vehicle were about to fall apart. Tick would've thought it impossible, but everything had just gotten much, much worse. His stomach twisted into a knot of panicked nausea.

His eyes snapped open, but they didn't seem to work. Everything was a blur of color, images and streaks, flashing and tilting—*vibrating*. He couldn't even make out Paul or Sofia; everything was messed up.

What's happening? he thought. *Maybe it's okay. I passed out last time—maybe this is totally normal.*

But the train shook again, twisted, bounced and rattled. Pain seared through Tick's head like someone had driven a crowbar into the top of his skull and worked it open, wedging the long piece of steel against his brain.

A booming crash sounded through the room, a horrible crunch of metal. The train jolted, and the pressure forcing Tick against the wall abruptly vanished. He fell forward and crashed into Paul. They both fell to the floor, landing on top of a crumpled Sofia.

The next few seconds were complete insanity. The vehicle bounced and twisted and shook, throwing Tick and the others in every direction, slamming them against the curved walls, the floor, into each other. Tick tried to ball up, squeezing his knees against his chest and covering his head with his arms, but it proved impossible. Like a giant gorilla shaking a can of peanuts, the three of them were tossed and jostled about until Tick thought for sure their lives were over.

And then, with one final crash that slammed them all into one padded side of the curved structure, it ended.

Everything stopped, grew still, silent.

The only sounds were the moans coming from the battered humans inside.

"My arm!" Paul screamed out. "I think I broke my stinking arm!"

"What happened?" Sofia asked, her voice strained and tight.

Portal Number Seven lay on its side. Tick and the others were in a crumpled heap on top of each other, resting on one of the curved, padded

sections that used to be vertical. With more groans and moans, they crawled away from each other. A hissing sound came from outside, followed by something that sounded like electric sparks.

Tick sat up, every inch of his body in pain. He looked over at Paul, who cradled his left arm with his right.

“You okay?” Tick said.

Paul looked up, a tear streaking out of his right eye. “Dude, it hurts, it really, really hurts.”

“You think you broke it?” Sofia asked, rubbing one of her ankles.

“Yeah,” Paul said, his face squeezed into a grimace of pain. “Ah, man, it kills!” Another tear slid down his cheek. Tick looked away, worried Paul would be embarrassed at being seen crying.

Sofia stood up, wobbling a second before she caught her balance. “We must have crashed or something. We’ve gotta get out of here, get Paul to a hospital.”

Tick joined her and together they walked across the curved wall to the door, which was about four feet in the air, sideways. It was twisted slightly, and it took both of them ramming it with their shoulders before it finally popped open and slammed against the crumpled white wall of the portal.

Tick and Sofia made surprised grunts at the same time when they saw where they were.

“What’s . . . out there?” Paul asked through clenched teeth.

Tick couldn’t answer, his eyes glued to the wall of thick, enormous trees beyond the doorway.

“We’re in a forest,” Sofia said.

As if the pain had finally sent him over the edge, Paul started laughing.

The Sickness of Sato

Master George felt his heart breaking in two as he stared at Sato.

The poor lad thrashed in his bindings, twisting his arms and legs, arching his back as he strained against the ropes tied to his ankles and wrists. He lay on a bed in the holding cell, the sheets a jumbled mess from his spasms and fits of lunacy. Deep bruises marked where the ropes touched his skin, yet he didn't stop his fruitless efforts to escape.

He had the illness, the disease.

Sato had gone quite insane.

Master George gripped his hands together, wishing so badly he could have just a few seconds of conversation with the *real* Sato, who was locked somewhere inside the mind infected by Chu's mysterious plague. The bravery shown by the boy in entering that mountain insane asylum made Master George so proud it hurt. He also felt again the pains of losing Sato's parents all those years ago, a dreadful death that still made him feel hot, as if the heat from the flying fires of that fateful day had never quite left his skin.

"We're going to make everything right," Master George said aloud, even though he doubted Sato could hear, let alone understand, his words. "Rutger and I are working on the antidote every second of the day. And we're getting close, very close. Hang in there, lad, hang in there. Your suffering may be the very key that saves us all."

Sato stilled, then, letting out an enormous sigh as his body came to rest on the sweaty, crumpled sheets of the bed. Master George leaned forward, terrified he'd made a huge mistake in saying anything.

"He's back in my head," Sato whispered in a chant-like voice that sent chills up Master George's arms. "He wants to speak to you."

"Sato, are you there?" Master George asked. "Even with him in your head, are you there, listening to me?"

"He wants to speak to you," Sato repeated.

"I don't care about him, Sato. I want you to know that we're doing everything we can to save you, and that your mission was an enormous success. We *are* going to take care of you."

Sato slowly turned his head until his eyes—glazed over as if drugged—met with Master George's. "That's very sweet of you, George. Your softness has always been your greatest weakness."

Master George sat back in his chair as if slapped, but he quickly regained his composure. "Am I speaking with you, Reginald? Come to show me how

low you've finally sunk, have you?"

"I know what you're doing," Chu said through Sato's mouth. Perhaps it was the eyes, or perhaps it was the unusual tone of his voice, but somehow it seemed like it really *was* Chu lying there, speaking.

"Quite smart, aren't you?" Master George replied.

A grin appeared on Sato's face, a grin so evil it made him look like a demon. "Yes, actually. I'm very, very smart, George. Which is why you'll never succeed in creating a cure for Dark Infinity."

"Who said anything about a cure?"

"Very well, George. Play your games, insult my intelligence. The day is coming, and very soon, when I will have an apprentice strong enough to make Dark Infinity fully functional. Everything will change, then. You'd be wise to consider your allegiances—I could use your help as well."

"What's your plan, Reginald?" Master George asked, knowing he should just walk away but unable to. "Haven't you enough power? Why must you ruin so many lives? Why can't you use your skills to *better* the Realities? Still not powerful enough to wash away your pathetic loathing of yourself? Quite sad, really."

Sato's face tightened, reddened, any semblance of a smile gone. "What I do, I do for the good of all mankind, George. The Realities *need* me, and this is the only way to gain the power necessary to change things. In the end, you and everyone else will thank me."

Master George leaned forward, elbows on knees, his eyes narrowing. "That sounds quite familiar, Reginald. I've heard almost the exact same words come out of the mouth of Mistress Jane. The both of you have merely cloaked your evil with good intentions. We will win in the end, I assure you."

"You have—"

"Silence!" Master George yelled, standing up. "I will hear no more of your lies!"

He walked out of the holding cell immediately, slamming the door shut with every ounce of strength left in his old body.

"I've never seen such a thick forest before," Sofia said as they picked their way slowly—very slowly—through the thickly clustered trees. Hoots and howls rang through the air, as if every zoo in the world had released their animals into the woods surrounding them. Pungent smells of rotting foliage, leaves, and bark mixed with the pleasant scents of pine and wildflowers. Tick felt as if all five of his senses were overloaded.

He and Sofia walked alongside Paul, helping him as best they could when he needed an extra hand. Both of his were occupied—one useless because of

his broken arm, the other busy holding the bad limb against his body.

“Dude, I know I sound like a sissy,” Paul said through his pain. “But this is killing me, man. I want my mom.”

“Unless your mom is a doctor,” Sofia said, stooping under a massive, moss-covered limb, “I don’t think she’s the one you want right now.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Paul replied. He struggled, doubling over to go under the same branch, his rear end and skinny legs the only way to balance himself with no arms to use. “I want a doctor. *Then* I want my mom.”

“My mom would tell me to quit whining and put a bandage on it,” Sofia said. “Frupey’s the only one who’d care in my house.”

Tick faltered for a second, almost tripping Paul, then kept walking as if nothing had happened. Paul’s silence showed he must have felt the same way—awkward at yet another sad reference to Sofia’s home life.

Despite the approaching noon hour, the forest was dark from the tall canopy of limbs and leaves overhead, everything masked in shadow. As Tick pushed through a thick tangle of brush, scratching his arms and legs, he couldn’t help but feel a little desperation at their predicament. They had only a few hours to get back to Circle City, run to the intersection that represented five o’clock, and then find whatever talisman marked their way out of this Reality.

After exiting the crashed Portal Number Seven, they’d seen the huge swath of ruined forest they’d left behind them, a wide slice of knocked-down trees, many of them burning or smoking. Based on the direction of the fiery trail, they could only guess—and hope—that continuing in the direction the Portal *should* have been traveling would lead them to their destination. But with the towering trees and thick undergrowth, it was almost impossible to know if they were walking in a straight line or wandering in circles. Everything about the place looked the same.

“Any guesses on what happened?” Sofia said, practically pushing Paul over a boulder wedged between two trees. His only response was a grunt when he thudded back on the ground.

“A bomb or something,” Tick said. “It’s probably just another part of Chu’s game. To see if we’d give up or not make it back on time.”

Paul pushed past an outreaching limb with his shoulder, then let it fly backward to smack Sofia in the face.

“Hey!” she yelled.

“Sorry,” Paul said, his pain-racked face somehow showing the slightest hint of amusement to Tick. “No arms, ya know—not much control.”

“How’d you like to have *two* broken arms?” Sofia replied.

“Wouldn’t be much worse than now.”

They entered a short break in the trees and found a clearing about twenty feet across, covered in bright green ivy. Rays of sunlight broke through, glistening on the dew-blanketed leaves, still damp hours after dawn. Without discussion, all three of them sat down to take a short rest, each finding a fallen tree or rock on which to sit.

“This is kind of cool,” Paul said, looking around at the border of trees, the green ivy, the cascading sun.

“Looks like something out of a fantasy book,” Tick said.

Paul nodded, then winced as if the small movement had hurt his arm somehow. “Yeah,” he said through a tight grin. “Maybe we’ll see some elves.”

“Or vicious, man-eating monkeys that glow in the dark,” Sofia added.

Tick sniffed. “Way to look on the bright side of things.”

“I just thought of something,” Sofia said, ignoring his remark.

“What?” Tick asked.

“Chu wouldn’t have any way of knowing we’d take that train today. How could this be part of his plan?”

Tick shrugged. “We know he’s following us, spying on us. With all his freaky techno gadgets, I’m sure he could make a train crash whenever he wanted.”

“I guess.” She didn’t sound convinced at all.

Paul stood after a few minutes of silence, his face wrinkling up like an old man’s. “I can’t take this much longer. We need to get back.”

“Come on,” Tick said, standing and pointing across the clearing. “I’m pretty sure we need to go that way.” He walked in that direction, Paul and Sofia right behind him.

“We’re getting close on the antidote.” Master George leaned forward, resting his folded hands on the kitchen table. Mothball sat to his left, Rutger to his right, Sally across from him. Muffintops curled on his lap, sound asleep. “Rutger, why don’t you give us a full report?”

The robust little man sat back in his chair, somehow resting one pudgy foot on his other knee—a feat that seemed impossible at first glance. “This plague is just about as fascinating a thing as I’ve ever seen. It’s completely nanotechnology based, yet it shows qualities of an airborne virus, as well as some bacterial characteristics. It’s basically an unprecedented mixture of biological manipulation, microarchitectural nanotech computer processing, and cellular airwave transmissions the likes of which we’ve never seen.”

Sally slammed his thick-knuckled hands on the table. “George, what in

tarnations is this fool-headed sack of pork-and-beans yappin' about?"

"Fool-headed?" Rutger countered. "Sally, you couldn't add five plus five using your fingers."

"So ya admit it, then?" Mothball said.

"What?" Rutger asked.

"That yer a sack of pork-and-beans? Only complained about the fool part, ya did."

"Ten!" Sally shouted out.

Everyone looked at Sally, who held up his hands, fingers outstretched.

"Five plus five is ten."

"Well, I *do* apologize," Rutger said. "I've vastly under-estimated your abilities to perform mathematical functions."

"Ain't nothin'," Sally replied. "I ain't never been able to reckon how much food you can stuff down that there gully a'yorn."

Mothball snorted a laugh, then covered her face as her shoulders shook.

"All right," Master George said with a huff. "That's quite enough of this silly bickering. Rutger, I can only speak for myself when I say I had a bit of trouble following your analysis as well, and I've been working with you from the beginning. Please, tell us again, but this time don't try to sound so smart."

"Try? Master George, I—"

"Please, Rutger."

Rutger shot a nasty look at Sally, then composed himself, taking a deep breath, which resembled a beach ball inflating and deflating on the chair. "In simpler terms, so *all* of you can understand it—Sato has nanotechs inside his body that can take control of his brain functions—and therefore his whole body. It's a technologically created disease, a virus made completely of artificial materials. However, it spreads just like an airborne virus, and once the plague is inside you, the virus can be controlled from a centrally located command center, which happens to be inside the Fourth Reality."

Sally threw his arms up in the air. "Well, you done cleared it up, han't ya!"

"'Tis a robot germ," Mothball said. "A wee little robot that makes ya do whatever that ruddy Chu tells ya. Spreads just like the flu, it does."

Sally looked over at Rutger, raising his eyebrows. "Now why on mama's grave couldn't you a-said it that simple-like?"

"Because I'm not used to speaking down to your level," Rutger replied, folding his short, fat arms.

Sally turned to Master George. "Why ain't we caught the sucker if it's liken the flu?"

"Because we've been extra careful," Master George replied. "We've worn gloves when we've had to handle Sato. We've fumigated his cell room on a

regular basis. We've worn masks when necessary. It's a dangerous disease, dear Sally, but it's not invincible. Not yet, anyway."

"What about the antidote?" Mothball asked. "Methinks you've got news, ya do, or we wouldn't be sittin' 'ere tryin' to decide which of these two knuckleheads gots the smaller brain."

"We're very close to having it solved," Rutger said. "Since the whole power of this plague lies in its ability to be controlled from Chu's headquarters, we think we can kill it in one swift stroke. All we have to do is inject our antidote into the home source, whatever that may be."

"That easy, is it?" Mothball asked.

Master George cleared his throat. "Easy, Mothball? I'm afraid not. This . . . device, this *thing*, that controls those infected with the nanoplague will be well-protected. Ironically, its vulnerability will be the very thing that ensures its *invulnerability*."

Sally merely blinked, and Master George had to suppress a smile.

"We can only assume that the device is what Reginald has referred to as Dark Infinity, and there's simply no hope or chance of us ever seeing it in person."

"Then what you figger we's gonna do?" Sally asked.

Master George paused, staring at Sally for a very long moment before finally speaking. "Our only hope is to get the antidote, once it's completed, to Tick and the others. Then they must win Chu's contest and get on the inside."

Mothball sniffed. Rutger coughed. Sally scratched his ear.

"Our only hope is for Reginald Chu to summon the very thing that will destroy him." Master George reached down and stroked the soft fur of his beloved cat, who was still snoozing. "But how we will do that without losing our dear young friends, I just don't know."

Monkeying Around

Paul was getting steadily worse. His arm had ballooned to twice its normal size, blue-purple streaks scratched across the tight skin. As bad as it looked, his moans of pain were worse; he sounded as if he were minutes away from dying. Whatever the case, his condition rattled Sofia's nerves.

"It can't be much farther," she said. "All that whining is only going to make it hurt more."

"Thanks for your concern, as usual," Paul replied, his voice strained. "Let me break *your* arm—see how you like it."

Sofia huffed. "I was in the train too." She held up her hands, shook them. "Don't see anything wrong here, do you?"

"It's gotta be up there somewhere," Tick cut in, trying to prevent an all-out war between his two friends. "Just keep walking."

They did. Over huge roots, under branches as thick as three men, through thorn-spiked bushes, past swampy pools of sludge. Scraped and bruised, Tick felt his thin hopes vanishing altogether as trees gave way to nothing but more trees. The forest thickened; the animal hoots and howls increased in volume; the air darkened with shadows. Nothing gave the slightest hint they were approaching a city or any kind of civilization whatsoever.

All the while, Paul's grunts and groans made life miserable for everyone—worrying about his condition seemed almost as bad as being in the condition itself.

"Hey, something's up there!" Sofia shouted.

Tick stumbled on a rock hidden under a pile of wet, clumpy leaves. They'd gone so long without anyone speaking that Sofia's words startled him. He grabbed a thick vine, which saved him from hitting the ground, but rubbed a nasty sore spot on his palm as it slid through his fingers.

"What?" Paul asked through a tight breath, the one word taking all his effort.

"A light," Sofia answered, pointing, then moving in that direction, just slightly off the course they'd been following. "It's definitely a light—a couple of them. I think it's a building!"

Tick's heart soared, his weary pessimism from just seconds earlier vanishing. "Let's go!" he shouted, rather pointlessly. Even Paul's step quickened with renewed strength.

The three of them slipped past a thick wall of foliage and rounded a huge oak. Ahead of them, the trees thinned and signs of Circle City were

everywhere. Tick could even see a couple of people walking along the great round road bordering the town.

“We did it!” Sofia said, then stepped forward, ready to start running. But something crashed down from the branches above, landing right in front of her. Sofia shrieked and jumped back, almost knocking Paul to the ground.

Tick stared ahead, his mind battling between fear and curiosity.

A thick, heavily furred animal crouched before them on all four legs, its slimy nostrils sniffing as it bared a mouth full of white fangs. Its body resembled a bear, but its face looked more like a wolf’s, yellow eyes glaring from a narrow, elongated face. Drool dripped from its jaws and teeth; a low growl rumbled deep within its chest.

But what caught Tick’s attention was how the creature *glowed*—a deep, eerie red that rippled along its fur like small waves on a pond. Each strand of hair shined, as if optical fibers charged with pulsing lava sprouted from the creature’s skin.

“The glowing monkeys,” Tick whispered.

“Radioactive demon bears,” Paul replied, a little louder.

The animal took a step forward, its eyes focusing on Paul, then Sofia, then Tick. Its nonstop growl gurgled and grew louder; its mouth opened wider. The thing seemed to have a hundred teeth, all sharp and pointy.

Tick yelped when something crashed to the ground to the right of the animal, then another to its left. Two more creatures, looking as vicious and hungry as the first. But they all stayed where they’d landed, studying the three humans.

“What do we do?” Tick asked, not caring how shaky his voice sounded.

“If we run, they might pounce on us,” Sofia said.

Paul didn’t say anything, cradling his swollen arm, his tight face drenched in sweat.

“If we *don’t* run, they might pounce on us,” Tick replied.

The lead creature barked, a loud yelp that rang through the air like the sickening, desperate plea of an injured dog. In the distance, something called back, then another, then another—eerie, ringing wails echoing through the thick forest.

How smart are these things? Tick wondered as he felt his brief spurt of curiosity quickly igniting into all-out panic. There was nothing they could do—nothing!

Creaking and crashing sounded from behind them, twigs and branches breaking, leaves and foliage swishing as large things moved closer. More of the creatures.

“We have to do something,” Tick said, not bothering to whisper anymore.

“Before we’re surrounded.”

“Turn and run,” Paul grunted.

“Can you do it?” Sofia asked.

“Got to,” he replied.

“On the count of three,” Tick said, “turn and go in a wide circle to the left. Head back around toward the city.”

Sofia shook her head. “Maybe we should split up.”

“No!” Tick said, surprised at how quickly the word came out. “On the count of three, together.”

“Fine, to the left.”

Heat surged through Tick’s veins, his heart skittering. “One . . . two . . .”

“Three!” Paul screamed.



They turned in unison and broke into a run, back into the thicker forest, scurrying around a huge tree. The three huge animals yelped their strange barks in response, and Tick could hear the heavy thumps of their footfalls in pursuit.

Sofia pushed into the lead, throwing herself forward through a tangled knot of bushes between two trees. Paul followed her, then Tick. He turned his head to see the first animal barrel around the wide trunk of the oak, slipping in the leaves as it tried to get its footing. Its yellow eyes flared, like two small suns buried in the dark red glow of its huge body.

Tick looked away, throwing his strength into his legs, running, ignoring the branches ripping at his clothes and skin. “Go, go, go!” he shouted.

They tore through the forest, Sofia dodging and sidestepping, finding the best route, slowly making her way in a wide arc to the left, back toward the city. Paul lumbered as he ran, gripping his hurt arm, leaning forward at a dangerous angle as he pushed ahead. Tick took up the rear, knowing the enormous monsters at his back could rip him to pieces at any second. He could hear their breath, their pounding footsteps, their steady growls.

More sounds entered the fray, crashing and breaking all around them, louder and closer than before. Tick didn’t dare look, but it sounded like entire trees had been snapped in two. The ground trembled, as if dozens of the creatures had showed up to join the hunt, flanking them, surrounding them—jumping through the branches *above* them.

“Faster!” he yelled.

The trees thinned again, signs of the city ahead jumping into view. They were only a few seconds from breaking through the forest edge and into the street. Tick suspected something prevented the glowing creatures from entering the town—he had no idea what, but he didn’t care; they were almost safe.

They ran on, the deafening cacophony of sounds filling the air like a sonic whirlwind. Splitting wood, cracking, breaking, crashing. The roars and screams of the creatures pursuing them. The thumps of their footsteps. Above it all, a steady rumble shook the ground, as if lightning had struck nearby, thunder splintering the world around them. Tick didn’t understand what was happening. Doubt filled him; how had they made it; how had they outrun the beasts?

Sofia broke past the last line of trees, Paul and Tick close behind. They didn’t slow or look back, running at a full sprint until they had reached the far side of the wide road encircling the city. Once there, panting and heaving for breaths, hands on knees, Tick turned to make sure they were safe.

Despite his exhaustion, despite his racing heart, despite his need to suck in as much air as possible, his breath caught in his throat. He straightened, eyes widening.

“What . . . the . . .” Paul managed between gasps of air. “What . . . how . . .”

Across the street, past the narrow area of small trees leading to the thicker

forest from which they'd just escaped, a huge bulk of mangled wood rose toward the sky, dozens of feet high, countless trees smashed into a coiled mass. It looked like a large section of the woods had been liquefied and squeezed together, *twisted* together, then frozen into a hideous swirl of matter. In several spots, some of the creatures that had chased them were trapped in the wall of wood, as if they'd been sealed in hardened tar right before escaping. One of the animals' legs twitched.

It was just like what they'd seen in the woods by Tick's home, right after the bizarre attack from Mr. Chu, when a deer had been trapped in the strangled structure of entwined trees.

Tick's mind emptied, void of thoughts. The two incidents had to be connected, but not even a hint of understanding cowered in the darkness of his head. Confused, he thought it must have something to do with Reginald Chu. Breathing heavily, relieved but uneasy, he turned away from the ugliness in the forest and looked at his friends.

"Someone please tell me what just happened," Paul said, his eyes still glued to the massive lump across the street.

"Wish I could," Tick said.

"We have the weirdest lives in the universe," Sofia said.

Paul finally broke his gaze, lifting his broken arm a few inches, testing his injury. With a wince, he lowered his elbow back into the cradle of his other arm. "I've gotta get to a hospital."

"We don't have time," Sofia said.

Paul let out a bitter laugh, but didn't say anything.

"What do you mean?" Tick said. "We have to find him a doctor."

Sofia pointed to her watch. "It's already four-thirty. We only have thirty minutes left."

"But—"

"Tick," Paul cut in.

Tick looked at him. Paul's body was covered in sweat, his eyes so bloodshot they looked as if they'd been dipped in red paint. The scowl of pain on his face had created deep lines in his forehead, large cracks that seemed permanent. But somehow, despite everything, Paul smiled—a miserable grimace, but a smile all the same.

"She's right," he said. "Broken arm, broken leg, broken head—doesn't matter. Hungry, thirsty, ugly—doesn't matter. We've only got thirty minutes."

Tick paused, exchanging long glances with both of them. Finally, he nodded.

"Let's go," he said.

They took off, running along the wide arc of the border street.

Five O'Clock

It took fifteen minutes to find the intersection representing five o'clock. Luckily, their hotel, The Stroke of Midnight Inn, had been two streets down from where they'd exited the forest. Once there, Tick and the others ran with renewed strength, counting the times off as they sprinted toward their destination.

One o'clock. Two o'clock. Three, four, five.

Gasping each breath, Tick doubled over to rest, hands on his knees, while he scanned the area for any sign of what they were supposed to do to wink away. They had only ten minutes until the *real* five o'clock.

The thick forest hugged the outside curve of the main street, the line of massive trees looming like ancient wooden towers. Thankfully, there was no sign of any mutant radioactive demon monkey-bears. The road that led from the town square of Circle City to the woods was bordered with various buildings and shops, people bustling about with smiles on their faces but blank looks in their eyes, as if kindness had worn thin and they only wanted to get their next task done. The eerie opera-lady music blared from unseen speakers.

The "T" formed by the two-street intersection was mostly empty, the clean pavement unblemished from potholes or cracks. Tick couldn't see so much as a sewer grate, and wondered why everything about this Reality seemed simple but . . . *off* somehow.

I hope I never find out, he thought. I want out of here.

Paul zigzagged back and forth as he scanned the street for any sign or clue of a place in which they might need to stand at the appointed time. He clutched his arm and limped as if the pain had traveled through the rest of his body. Sofia searched as well, and Tick joined in. No one said a word, but worry and discouragement hung in the air like wilting clouds. Time was running out. Though confident they were in the right place, Tick didn't know if that was good enough.

It does not matter; I do not care.

Just make sure your feet find air.

"The word *air* has to be carved somewhere," Paul said.

"Yeah," Tick mumbled as he walked awkwardly along, bent over, searching the pavement.

Sofia had stopped, her arms folded. “I think we’re thinking too much. Or maybe not enough.”

Tick looked at his watch. Six minutes. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I think all we need to do is jump,” she replied. “Jump up at five o’clock, and our feet will be in the air.”

Tick stood straight, stretched his back. “Hmm. Possible,” he said. But something tickled the back of his brain. Something didn’t seem right. “But what if that’s not it?”

“Got any better ideas?”

Tick looked at Paul, who was still searching, still wincing with every step. His arm looked like a giant purple slug.

“What do you think?” Tick asked.

Paul answered without stopping his hunt. “I thought of that, but . . . I don’t know, I guess there’s nothing else to do. Just keep looking, and if we don’t find anything by the one-minute mark, we’ll stand in the middle of the road and jump at five o’clock.”

“Sounds good,” Tick said, resuming his search.

One minute passed. Two. No sign of anything, anywhere. Two minutes left. Nothing.

“Time’s almost up,” Sofia said, running toward the exact middle of the intersection. “Come on, hurry!”

Paul and Tick joined her. One minute to go. Then, like someone had dropped a water balloon on his head, a thought slammed into his mind. *Make sure your feet find air. Make sure your feet find air!*

“Your socks and shoes!” he screamed, reaching down before they could respond and ripping off his right shoe, not bothering to untie it. “Take off your shoes!” He pulled off his sock and then moved to his left foot.

Neither of them responded or argued—they did as they were told. Paul used his feet to kick off his shoes, then his one good arm to remove his socks. Anyone watching might have thought they’d gone nuts, or had ants crawling along their skin. But in a matter of twenty seconds, the three of them stood barefoot, the pavement warm on their feet, their shoes and socks gripped in their hands.

“Fifteen seconds,” Sofia whispered through a big breath.

“You’re a genius, Tick,” Paul said, his shoes wedged under his armpit.

“Ten seconds,” Sofia said.

“Maybe we should jump just in case,” Paul blurted out.

“Do it,” Tick agreed.

Sofia nodded as she counted the last five seconds. “Five, four, three, two, one—now!”

Tick had already bent his legs, and jumped into the air on her call.

When he came back down, the world around them had vanished, and his feet landed on something very cold.

“This is weird,” Rutger said as he stared at the command center screen, his eyes glued to the tracking marks of Tick’s Earwig Transponder. Master George, Sally, and Mothball stood behind him. They’d all come running when the chime had rung through the building, indicating Tick had winked to another location.

“Weird, indeed,” Master George whispered.

“Whatcha two hanks goin’ on ’bout?” Sally bellowed. “I ain’t got nary a clue what that thing a’yorn’s tellin’ me.” He pointed at the screen.

Rutger answered. “They just winked to a large plain in Reality Prime—but in the middle of nowhere. The far northern reaches of Canada, it looks like. Nothing for dozens of miles around them.”

“Goodness gracious me,” Master George whispered. “Chu’s tests are getting way out of hand. The poor chaps and Sofia will freeze up there!”

“Mayhaps we need be rescuin’ them,” Mothball said.

Master George shook his head adamantly. “Absolutely not. The antidote is as complete as it’ll ever get, and we have to get it where it needs to be. Let’s just all pray it *works*. Sally.”

The large man jumped, as if he’d been caught daydreaming. “Yessir?”

“This may be our best chance—our last chance. I want you to wink there right away and give them the antidote.”

Sally’s eyes grew wide. “But . . . I’m a-feared of the cold somethin’ awful.”

“No matter,” Master George said over his shoulder as he walked briskly away, heading for the testing lab. “Come on, chop-chop!”

Rutger couldn’t help but feel sorry for the big lug of a man. He reached up and tapped Sally on the elbow. “You’ll be fine. Just wink in, wink out. No problem.”

Sally laughed, his booming chortle echoing off the walls of the room. “You ain’t got no thermal undies I could borry, do ya?”

“Hilarious,” Rutger said, hopping down from his chair to follow Master George.

“Ah, dude, it’s freezing here!” Paul said. He sat down on the hard ground and started struggling back into his shoes using only one arm. Sofia knelt

down and helped him.

Although the bottoms of Tick's feet felt like they stood on ice, he turned in a slow circle, gawking at the new place they'd been winked to. It was a barren, miserable land, flat and gray in every direction, all the way to the horizon. Not a plant or tree or animal in sight. The sun poked through a brief break in a cloud-heavy sky, but it added no color to the bleakness, no warmth. There was no snow, but everything about the area looked cold and dreary.

Then he saw something that stopped him. A small building—a tiny, leaning wooden hut just a few hundred feet away.

“Just be glad it's not winter,” Sofia said, tying her shoelaces. “Or we'd have already been frozen.”

Tick snapped out of his daze and sat down, pulling on his first sock. “I wonder what that little shack is over there.” He pointed.

Paul and Sofia glanced in that direction.

“Looks abandoned,” Paul said. He grimaced as he lay back on his one good elbow, his injured arm resting on his ribs.

Tick finished tying his shoes. “I wonder where we are.” He stood up, the ground too cold and hard.

Sofia joined him. “Who knows? Let's go check out that building.”

Paul groaned. “Couldn't that jerk have sent us somewhere that has a hospital? I'd settle for a place that sells aspirin. But no—he had to send us to Pluto.”

“Come on,” Tick said, offering his hand to help him stand.

Paul shook his head. “It hurts too much. Got my own way of moving now.” He pushed off with his elbow, then rolled to his knees. After taking a couple of deep breaths, he stumbled to his feet, a little off balance. Tears rimmed the bottom edges of his eyes; one escaped and trickled down his cheek.

Tick quickly looked away, pretending he hadn't noticed. *Oh, man*, he thought. *He's gonna die on us.*

Sofia wasn't as kind. “Are you *crying*? I thought you were a lot tougher than that.”

Tick felt a shudder of anger wash through him; he had a sudden urge to punch Sofia in the arm, but quelled it. “I'd cry too if my arm was broken and I was stuck in the middle of nowhere. Come on.” He started walking toward the small shack.

He didn't look back to see their response, but he heard them following. Paul's feet scraped the ground with every step, sounding like he dragged a dead body behind him.

As they approached the building, Tick noticed it was at least three times as

big as he'd originally thought, and farther away. *There's something about a vast land of nothingness that messes up your senses*, he thought.

The building had only one story, its entire structure made from warped, sun-faded wooden boards with thousands of splinters poking out. The two-sided roof peaked in the middle, slanting steeply downward until it overhung the walls in eaves that almost touched the ground. *To handle all the snow in the winter*, Tick thought. The place had no windows, and its door was a simple slab of wood, the only thing on the shack that had ever been painted. Only a few streaks of dull red had survived the weather. A rusted doorknob hung loosely from the warped door.

"Looks just like Grandma's house," Paul said. His voice was so tight Tick couldn't tell if he was joking.

"I bet whoever lives here has never heard of Pacini spaghetti," Sofia said.

Tick was about to respond but stumbled on his first word. They were close enough for him to notice something creepy about the door. The red paint he'd seen wasn't the remnants of an age-old decorating scheme after all.

They were *words*, scrawled across the entire face of the wooden door from top to bottom.

"Look!" he shouted, already sprinting ahead to see what it said.

"What?" Sofia yelled from behind him. Tick ignored them, and soon they ran to catch up.

Tick stopped just a few feet in front of the door. At first, he couldn't make out the words of the message, the writing hasty and messy, some of the paint having run down like blood into the other letters. But there was no mistaking Tick's *name*, and soon everything else became clear.

He tried to speak, but his mouth had dried up and his tongue wouldn't move. He felt like someone had rammed a glob of cotton down his throat with a wooden spoon.

Sofia read the words out loud.

Only two people may enter this door.

Atticus Higginbottom and Mistress Jane.

All others will die a horrible death.

Do not test me on this.

The Antidote

Tick could only stare at the message, the world around him shrinking away. He felt like an entire hour had passed, but he knew it had only been a minute or two since Sofia had read the words aloud.

He could only stare.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Paul said, though his voice sounded to Tick like it came down a long tunnel.

“What do you think, Einstein?” Sofia replied, her tone full of anger. “Chu wants Tick to go in there, but not us!”

“I know, but what does that *mean*?”

“Looks like ya’ll hain’t got nuttin’ but trouble comin’ down dem gullets a’yorn.”

The gruff voice from behind shook Tick out of his stupor. He whirled to see Sally standing there, arms folded, looking like he’d just lost that morning’s grits and eggs. Face pale, beard scraggly, eyes bloodshot, the man didn’t seem too happy to see them. He was dressed in his usual lumberjack garb—thick green-flannel shirt, dusty overalls, big brown work boots. A leather satchel hung loosely over his shoulder.

Paul let out a little yelp at Sally’s surprise appearance. “Sa-Sally? Where’d you come from?”

“Where you think, boy?” He made an unpleasant sucking sound in his throat then spat on the ground. “Ol’ George sent me after you rug rats.”

“How’d you get here?” Sofia asked. “You can’t tell me there’s a cemetery nearby.”

Sally turned and pointed at nothing in particular. “There’s a might nice spat of his fancy kyoopy gobbledegook back yonder ways. You three too busy starin’ at that big pile of sticks to notice me comin’ up on ya.”

Tick shook his head, finally feeling like the world had solidified again around him. *That message on the door*, he thought. *That message!* “Why’d Master George send you back to us? I thought we were on our own.”

Sally shrugged his bulky shoulders. “Still are, I ’spect. Just come to pass on a little somethin’, that’s all.” He slid the satchel off his shoulder and down his arm, then opened it up. After a few seconds of rummaging around, he pulled out a shiny silver cylinder, two inches in diameter and six inches long.

“This here whatchamacallit is for you whipsnaps,” he said, holding the small rod out toward Sofia, who stood closest to him.

She shook her head. “If that’s what I think it is, you better give it to Tick.

We can't go with him anymore."

Sally's arm dropped to his side, the cylinder gripped in his hand; his eyes squinted in confusion. "What in the name of Mama's chitlins stew you talkin' 'bout? You ain't done forgot the plan, did ya?"

Tick wanted to say something, but the words stuck in his throat again.

"No, we didn't forget the *plan*," Sofia said with a sneer, then pointed toward the door with the creepy red letters scrawled across it. "But that stupid door says that only Tick can go through it. If Master George wants him to get close to Chu, looks like he's on his own."

"You don't know that," Tick said, forcing the words out through a cough that rubbed the back of his mouth raw. "Maybe I just need to go in, do something, and come right back out."

"Doubt it," Paul muttered.

"Why?" Tick asked.

"I just have a feeling it's done for us, dude. I think Chu wanted you from the beginning because of your freak show back in the Thirteenth—winking us with a broken Barrier Wand and all. We're done—I know it."

Tick looked at Sofia, pleading with his eyes.

"I think he's right," she said, frowning.

Sally walked forward until he was close enough to read the message on the door. "Whoever wrote that nonsense ain't got a bit of learnin' in him, I can tell ya that. I can barely read dem chicken scratches."

Sofia raised her eyebrows at Tick as if to say, *When did Sally get so smart?*

"Messy or not," Paul said, "it doesn't beat around the bush. Only Tick can go in there. If we try, we'll die a, uh, horrible death."

"That's only half the problem I'm worried about," Tick said. "What does Mistress Jane have to do with it? Why just me and her?"

"Reckon you and that no-good tweety-bird's all Chu cares about," Sally said with a grumble. He spit again.

Tick squeezed his fists at his side, then rubbed them against his temples. "I can't do this," he whispered. "I can't go in there by myself." His insides churned with panic, as if internal wires had been crossed, messing up his whole organ system. He felt like a sissy, but the truth of it weighed on him like the chilly air had finally frozen solid around him. *I can't do it*, he thought. *I can't go in there without Paul and Sofia!*

"Ah, now," Sally said. "Ain't no time for that. You ain't got nuttin' but brave inside you, boy. Suck it on up, hear?" He held the shiny chrome cylinder out to Tick.

Tick stared at it, not moving a muscle.

Paul walked over and put his one good arm around Tick's shoulders,

wincing with the effort. He leaned over and spoke close in Tick's ear. "You listen to me, bro. No way we're gonna let anything happen to you. You're the one with that transponder thingy in your ear—we'll go back with Sally and keep an eye on every move you make. We won't sleep, won't eat, until we can wink back to get you."

Tick nodded, then looked at Sofia. She stepped forward and grabbed the silver rod from Sally, then lightly shoved it against Tick's stomach.

"Paul's right," she said, trying her best to throw compassion into her voice. "The three of us will wink back to Master George and watch you like a hawk. First sign of trouble and we'll come help you."

Tick waited a few seconds, then finally took the cylinder from Sofia. It was cool to the touch and slippery in his sweaty hands. "I don't think you should do that. Follow me *or* come after me, I mean."

"Why?" Paul asked.

"Well, if Chu wants me alone—or . . . with Mistress Jane—then we better do things his way."

"For awhile, maybe," Sofia said. She looked as if she might say more, but then closed her mouth.

Tick looked at Sally and held up the silver rod. "What am I supposed to do with this anyway?"

Sally grunted and rummaged through his leather pack again. "Ain't no way ol' George be lettin' *me* tell ya." He pulled out a wadded up piece of paper and handed it to Tick. "Read that, ain't too hard no-how."

Tick unfolded the paper with shaking hands then read it out loud:

Dear Master Atticus,

You hold in your hands the antidote to Reginald Chu's nanoplague, which is causing people all through the Realities to go insane. We believe the plague can be destroyed by injecting this silver rod and its contents into the mechanism that controls the virus-like nanoparticles. You need simply to smash the antidote against Chu's device—Dark Infinity—and let Rutger's brilliant engineering do the rest of the work.

I need not tell you the incredible amount of danger you are about to undertake. I daresay, I almost feel tempted to abandon the whole thing. But alas, I think you'd agree that we have no choice. The fate of all the Realities may hang in the balance. Atticus, you must do this thing. You must do it, no matter the cost.

Once we see sign of your success, we will come and rescue you. This, my good man, I swear to you.

Your comrade in arms,

Master George

Tick held up the cylinder, studied it closely, ignoring his surge of panic. The odd object had no blemishes, no scratches, no smudges—it was perfectly smooth, perfectly shiny.

“Piece of cake,” he muttered with a pitiful attempt at a laugh. “Waltz into Chu’s house and smash this against something. Piece of cake.”

“Yeah, dude, piece of cake,” Paul said. Tick couldn’t help but wish he could trade places with Paul, broken arm and all.

“You heard him,” Sofia said. “You heard Master George. We’ll be watching your every move, and we’ll come save you as soon as . . .” She trailed off, and Tick wished desperately that no one would say another word.

“I’m going,” he said, pushing the fear away. *Now or never. Just move.* “I’m going right now. Sally, can I have that bag of yours?”

Sally nodded, then handed over the leather satchel. Tick put the cylinder and the message from Master George inside, zipped it up, then slung it over his shoulder. “I’m going right now,” he said again.

Without waiting for a response, Tick turned and walked up to the dilapidated wooden door. As he reached down and twisted the loose handle, the others spoke from behind him.

“We’ll be watching you, dude,” Paul said.

“You’ll be the only thing we care about until we’re back together,” Sofia blurted out.

“You be tough chickens, now, ya hear?” Sally shouted.

Tick pushed open the door and stepped inside. As he went through, a cold tingle shot down his back.

Beautiful Black Hair

The room was completely dark but strangely warm. Tick pulled the door closed behind him, fighting to calm his breath, standing still in the blackness. The floor beneath him was solid, smooth; the air smelled like . . . flowers. Like an old lady's perfume. He sniffed, then scratched his nose.

"Hello?" he called out. *Isn't that what they always say in the movies when they walk into a haunted house?* "Hello?" he repeated. His voice died as soon as it left his mouth, without even an echo.

The entire room abruptly flared with lights; Tick's hand shot up to shield his eyes.

It came from everywhere at once: the walls, floor, and ceiling were made out of a rough material that glowed brightly. Tick turned around to see that the door had disappeared—and nothing looked anything like the inside of an old wooden shack.

Chu had already winked him to a new place.

The room was a perfect circle, thirty feet in diameter, bare of furniture except for several, almost invisible, clear plastic benches curving along the walls. That was it—no decorations, no signs, no light fixtures, nothing. Just glowing walls and invisible benches.

"Heaven's waiting room," Tick whispered.

"No, it's not," a soft voice said from his left.

Tick spun in that direction, stumbling backward two steps. Ten feet from him stood a tall woman, close to the wall, dressed in a tightly fitted yellow dress. Long, silky black hair hung from her head and framed a pale but perfect face; her red lips pulled tightly into a grim smile. Brilliant green eyes stared through horn-rimmed glasses. Tick was certain he couldn't have missed her before. She had appeared out of nowhere.

"Who . . . who are you?" he asked.

The woman ignored him, scanning the room around her with a disgusted look, as if it were full of snakes and lizards and frogs. "This place is about as far from heaven as you can get in the Realities." Despite her apparent anger, her voice still gave Tick goosebumps, as if he listened to someone playing the harp.

"Who are you?" he repeated. "Are you—"

"Yes," she replied, finally focusing her eyes on him. "I imagine you saw a message similar to mine. My name is Mistress Jane, as yours must be Atticus Higginbottom."

She walked over to him, her feet tap-tap-tapping as she did so. She stopped and held out a hand, which he took and shook quickly before letting go, a shudder of nausea trembling in his stomach. Master George's most hated enemy stood inches from him.

Tick cleared his throat. "I . . . I thought you were bald." He didn't know what else to say, what else to do.

Mistress Jane smiled, though it was empty of humor or kindness. "Yes, I was bald for a very long time. So very long." She stared past his shoulder as if remembering something sad from her past. "And it was quite . . . *painful* to grow it back so quickly. Painful, but sweet. That's how the Chi'karda works in the Thirteenth, after all."

Tick swallowed, fidgeted on his feet. He was so lost and confused and scared. His mind spun; his heart thumped.

Mistress Jane caught his eyes again, then continued. "So many things have changed, boy. *I've* changed. Do you understand?"

Tick couldn't speak. He slowly shook his head.

Jane nodded. "Yes, we have a lot to talk about. A lot." She reached out and took his hand, squeezed it. "Reginald wanted me to kill you, you know? That was my task."

"Kill me?" Tick managed to say, almost a squeak.

Jane's eyes closed and opened in a long, drawn out blink. "Yes, I was supposed to kill you. And I could have, easily—I crashed your spintrain to make Chu think I was at least trying. But I knew you'd survive." She paused. "But you and I are going to turn the tables, Atticus."

"What do you mean?" Tick pulled his hand away from hers.

Jane paused again before answering. "As dangerous as you and that baboon George may think I am, Mr. Higginbottom, Reginald Chu is far, far worse. *Far* worse. And you and I are going to stop him. Forever."

Paul stared at the door for a full two minutes after it closed behind Tick, tempted to rip it back open and chase after his friend. But after all they'd been through—after all the things they'd seen Chu do to them—he knew the warning scrawled across the wood was for real.

Finally, he looked away, turned his back to the building. A fresh burst of pain exploded up his arm and into his shoulders, making him cry out before he could stop himself. For the hundredth time that day, tears welled in his eyes.

"Best be gettin' on," Sally grunted, glancing one last time at the door. "Better get that little sack of taters Rutger workin' on dat nasty limb a'yorn." His eyes fell to Paul's swollen arm. "Dat don't look so good."

The lumberjack started walking away, making a straight line toward an area that looked just like the miles of dull nothingness in every other direction. “Come on, rug rats!” he yelled over his shoulder.

Sofia and Paul turned in unison to look at the door one last time.

“Wonder what he’s doing now,” Paul said.

Sofia touched Paul’s shoulder. “We’ll find him,” she whispered, barely audible. “Master George’ll help us find him.” She nodded, then ran off toward Sally.

Paul followed; every step felt like a sledgehammer against his forearm. *My only hope now is a tiny, fat dude named Rutger. Great.*

They probably walked half a mile before Sally stopped and turned to face the kids behind him. “Right chere seems ’bout right. Scoot yer buns on over here.”

Paul cradled his arm tightly against his body and stepped as close to Sally as he could. Sofia pressed in from the right until they were all squished together in a small circle.

“Great balls of turtle scat!” Sally bellowed. “You ain’t gotta get so close I can smell yer pits, now do ya!”

Despite the pain, Paul snickered as he backed away a couple of steps. Sofia did the same, but her eyes kept flickering back to the wooden building.

Sally reached into the pocket of his flannel shirt, digging for a few seconds before he pulled it back out again with nothing in his hand. “Ol’ George’ll be winkin’ us right directly.”

“What did you just do?” Paul asked.

Sally scrunched up his forehead like Paul had just asked him what the color green looked like. “Triggered the nanobobbamajig, boy, what else?”

Before Paul could ask another question, he felt a quick chill flash across his shoulders and down his spine. The drab world around him vanished, replaced instantly by a room filled with leather couches and chairs, a warm fire crackling and spitting in a small brick fireplace. Master George stood in front of it, the Barrier Wand clasped in his hands and Muffintops the cat purring at his heels. Rutger perched on a floor pillow, leaning back against one of the sofas, his hands folded and resting on top of his huge belly.

“Quickly,” Master George sputtered, throwing all greetings and formalities out the window. “Have a seat and tell us everything, and I mean everything!”

“My arm,” Paul said, his voice breaking on the last word. “My arm,” he repeated. Now that help was so close, the pain seemed to intensify, flaring through his whole body as if more than one bone had been broken.

Master George looked down and noticed the ballooned arm, the skin stretched taut, bruised and bulging. “My goodness, man! Your arm is hurt!”

Paul said nothing, feebly attempting a smile.

“Rutger,” Master George snapped. “Take Paul to the infirmary this instant. Then wink in Doctor Hillenstat from the Second and tell him to deaden the pain, set the bone, cast it—what have you. We’ll follow you and have our discussion there. Chop-chop!”

Rutger rolled to his left, got stuck, then grunted as he tried rolling to his right. His body slipped off the pillow, his arms and legs flailing as he tried to find the leverage he needed to stand up. “Good grief, would someone *give me a hand*, please?”

Mothball entered the room, wiping her hands on her shirt and chewing on something. “What’s this?” she asked. “There’s a ruddy bowling ball loose, there is! Someone snatch it up before it breaks a vase!”

“Oh, go on and make jokes, then,” Rutger said, lying on the floor as his body rolled back and forth. “Poor Master Paul only has a severely broken arm—no big deal.”

Mothball’s face melted into a frown as her eyes fell upon Paul’s injury. “Oh, dear, terribly sorry. Quite nasty that, by the looks of it.”

“Yeah,” was all Paul managed to say. The room had started to pitch and spin in his vision.

“All right, then,” Mothball said as she reached down and yanked Rutger to his feet with a big roar. “Get the lad the help he needs.”

“Come on, Paul,” Rutger said, swiping at the dust on his round bottom.

Paul nodded and followed him as he heard Master George speaking to the others.

“Sofia, Sally—I need to know everything.”

The Tale of Mistress Jane

Let's have a seat," Mistress Jane said. "I'm sure Reginald will be here shortly to rant and rave his frustration that we both made it here alive."

She grabbed Tick's arm again, pulling him toward one of the impossibly clear benches lining the lighted walls. Once there, she let go and sat down, crossing her legs under the tight yellow material of her dress. She flicked her thick black hair across her shoulder then motioned for Tick to sit next to her.

Tick wanted to run. No, he wanted to yell and scream at Jane for the terrible things she'd done, including killing one of Mothball's closest friends, Annika. He wanted to rip her ridiculous glasses off, throw them on the ground, crush them with his shoe, then punch her right square between her flaming green eyes. He wanted to—



“Sit down!” she shouted, her voice echoing through the room as though a chorus of Janes had called out the two words.

Tick fell to the bench, his short burst of spirit crushed. He folded his hands in his lap, staring at the glowing floor below his feet.

Jane took a deep breath. "I'm . . . I'm very sorry, Atticus. I should not have spoken to you like that. I apologize."

Tick closed his eyes for a few seconds, then opened them again. He realized suddenly that the woman sitting next to him was crazy. Crazy and dangerous.

"Now," Jane said. "There are a lot of things I need to tell you. I'm sure George has made you think I'm a monster, a cruel and heartless devil who cares nothing for the Realities or their people. Nothing could be further from the truth."

Tick looked up. "How can you say that? I saw Annika die—killed by those disgusting monsters *you* created! Then you tried to have them kill me!"

Mistress Jane held up a finger to silence him. "I want you to be quiet. Do you understand this request?"

"Why should I—"

Jane flicked her finger. Something yanked Tick from the bench and threw him three feet into the air, spinning his body in the middle of the room. He screamed, thrashing his arms and legs. He spun faster, the unseen force gripping him like invisible claws as it wheeled him about, pinching and battering him.

"Stop it!" he yelled. "Put me down!"

The force vanished in an instant, and he crashed to the floor, one leg bent awkwardly beneath his body. He cried out as he squirmed to the side and pulled it straight. Gasping for breath, he pushed himself to his knees and stared at Jane, his eyes on fire.

"Why would you—"

"*Silence!*" she screamed, cutting him off again as she stood up, her face flashing red. "You will come over here. You will sit. And you will listen. Do you understand?"

Tick felt as if his old nemesis, Billy "The Goat" Cooper, had just sucker punched him in the stomach three times. Fighting tears, he slowly got to his feet and walked back to the bench. Without looking at Mistress Jane, swearing to himself he would never look her in the eyes again, he sat down.

After a few seconds of silence, Jane sat as well, crossing her legs again.

"Atticus," she said, almost in a whisper, as if she hadn't spent the last minute torturing him. "This . . . these are the things about me I don't like. My temper, my impatience, my quickness to anger. I've tried very hard in recent weeks to better myself. To improve myself and be kinder to others."

Tick snorted with all the disgust he could muster. "Yeah, obviously."

Mistress Jane paused. “Think what you will. But know this—if Reginald had challenged me to kill you two months ago, perhaps even one month ago, your body would even now be rotting beneath several feet of earth. I have changed my ways as best I can, but my goal remains the same as it has always been—to save the Realities. I will never waver from it.”

Tick clenched his hands together, still staring at the white floor. “I don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

“Reginald needs us, Atticus. He needs someone very powerful to help him with his project. His Dark Infinity project. And the two of us were the only ones he deemed worthy enough for the test—you with your silly riddles and death-defying adventures, and me with the simple task of killing you. Only one winner. Only one apprentice for Chu.”

Tick leaned back against the wall and looked at Jane, already breaking his vow. “How could he possibly think that killing me would be a challenge for you? That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Jane smiled, her green eyes flickering with a dark flame. “Atticus. Boy. You have no idea what you’ve done these past days. What you’re *capable* of doing. Though I don’t yet understand it, I have no shame in admitting that *you* have more potential than even I do. And you’ve done it without the benefit of living in the Thirteenth and soaking in its quantum mutations.”

Tick shook his head and leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, resuming his study of the floor. “You don’t need to talk anymore—you’ve proven that you’re crazy ten times already.” From the corner of his eye, he noticed Jane’s hands quiver. She folded them together and paused a long time before speaking again.

“I’m going to tell you a story, Atticus,” she said in a calm, quiet voice. “I want to tell you so you’ll understand me. I only ask that you listen without interrupting. Will you do that for me?”

Tick didn’t say anything, but he couldn’t help feeling a surge of curiosity. He finally nodded.

Mistress Jane began. “I’m a scientist, Atticus. I have been since my earliest memories, experimenting in the backyard and reading every book in the library on the laws of nature. I have lived it and breathed it, as they say. Twenty years ago I was recruited into the Realitants, in much the same way you were. It didn’t take long for me to master the wonders of quantum physics and excel in my assigned missions to study and document the Realities. By my third year, I was the most powerful of all the Realitants, and everyone knew it.”

She paused, as if her pride wanted to ensure Tick realized what she’d said. That *she* was the best of the best.

Tick didn’t move or say a word, and Jane finally continued.

“But then something happened, Atticus. Something tragic that still wakes me in the night, haunting me with visions and memories. I fell in love.”

Tick couldn't help but look up at her. He didn't know what he'd been expecting, but this surprised him.

Jane nodded. “I won't speak his name to you because your ears aren't worthy to hear it. And please”—she held out a hand and lightly caressed his arm then pulled back—“I don't mean that as an insult to you. It's just that . . . his name is sacred to me, and I've sworn to never say it aloud. I hope you understand.”

“I don't care what his name was,” Tick mumbled under his breath.

Jane's hands shook again, and Tick winced. *Shut up, Tick*, he thought. *Don't say another word or she might twist your head off!*

“He loved the color yellow.” Jane laughed, a distant, surprisingly light-hearted chuckle that faded as quickly as it began. “It was strange how much he loved the color. Yellow shirts were his favorite; he painted the walls of his home yellow. And he always gave me daisies and daffodils. I asked him once why he loved it so much and he told me it was because yellow represented peace. And if anything described the life and purpose of that man, it was peace.”

Tick rolled his eyes, quickly rubbing his face to hide it from Jane.

“I loved him, Atticus. I loved him so much. It hurt me when I had to say good-bye to him and attend to my Realitant missions and assignments. It hurt me when he kissed me good night, whenever his hand let go of mine. That's the only way I can truly describe how much he meant to me. I loved him so much, it *hurt*. I would have done anything to take away that pain, to be with him every second of every day. I loved him so much, I almost hated him.”

A ball of sickness grew in Tick's belly. He didn't know why—and he certainly didn't understand all this lovey-dovey stuff Jane was talking about—but something about it made him ill. Something about it was *obsessive*.

“And then it happened,” Jane said. “The tragedy that would serve as the changing point of my life, the moment that defined my purpose from that day forward.”

After a long pause, Tick asked, “What happened?” He couldn't help it—he wanted to know.

“He was *murdered*.” She screeched the word, a raw squeal from the back of her throat. “Killed by inhuman slugs who'd only wanted money. Killed by slime and filth, left in his own blood, suffering as it leaked out drop by drop. Slaughtered like an animal *by* animals, and there was nothing I could do to save him. He was *taken* from me, Atticus. The only person I'd ever truly loved, and he was taken from me.”

Jane took a deep breath, then spoke rapidly as she stared into space, as if in

a trance. “I couldn’t accept it, I just couldn’t. I knew too much about the possibilities, the endless possibilities of life and the universe. I went to each known Reality, sought out his Alterants. I took them, captured them, tried to love them, tried to train them to love me. But they weren’t him, they were different; they were disgusting and filthy and unworthy to bear his countenance. It taught me how disgusting and filthy and unworthy the Realities are—how wretched and *wrong* they are. It’s not built right, Atticus, it’s not *made* right. It’s wrong, it’s all wrong! We have to destroy it, fix it, rebuild it!”

Tick scooted away from her. She didn’t seem to notice, barely pausing to breathe as she continued blurting out words.

“I devoted my life to him, to his memory, to making things right in the universe. He’s out there, floating in the goop of quantum mechanics, waiting for me to find him and bring him back. But first I must remake the Realities, create the Utopia we all believe in. First I must make it right, make it right, make it right, *make it right!*”

She stopped, her chest heaving as she sucked in air. “I’m sorry . . . I’m sorry.”

Tick’s eyes were wide, his breath held somewhere inside his chest. He knew for certain he’d never seen someone completely wig out like Jane had just done. Not that he’d doubted it before, but she was now a certified nutso.

Jane pulled at her black hair. “It’s why I cut it off, Atticus. I was ashamed of it. It’s black, and I know that *he* always wished it had been blonde, to match his beloved color. Yellow. Dear, dear yellow . . .” She rubbed the dark strands between her fingers. “But not anymore. I’ve changed. I will change more. The goal is the same, but I’ve changed how—”

“*What is this nonsense!*”

Tick jumped so hard at the sudden, booming voice that he fell off the bench, his rear end slamming onto the floor. Even Jane sucked in a quick breath as Tick scrambled to his feet, his eyes darting directly to the source of the shout.

An Asian man with black hair stood in the middle of the room, dressed in a dark suit. A man Tick had always considered one of his best friends in the world, teacher or not. But even as he thought it, Tick knew this wasn’t his Mr. Chu. This wasn’t the kind, funny, humble science instructor of Jackson Middle School in Deer Park, Washington.

No, it was Reginald Chu. The *evil* Reginald Chu.

Tick's Dark Secret

Tick backed against the wall, feeling the edge of the bench cut into the backs of his knees. Though Mistress Jane had obviously been as surprised by Chu's appearance as Tick, she'd recovered, sitting calmly and expressionless as she stared at their visitor.

Chu walked forward, his forehead wrinkled and eyes narrowed in anger, his pace brisk. He stopped ten feet in front of them, his eyes never leaving Jane.

"What is this?" he asked, scrunching up his face like he'd just spotted a rotting body. "I'm trying to find the one person in the Realities worthy enough to help me in the greatest scientific achievement of all time—and you two sit here chitchatting like old friends. All that's missing are the cups of tea."

"What did you expect us to do?" Jane asked, her voice calm. "There's not much here to keep us entertained. I guess we could've wrestled or played freeze tag." She nudged Tick with an elbow.

Chu folded his hands behind his back, smoothing the anger out of his face. "*Mistress Jane*, I don't care what powers you may think you have, but you'll be dead in an instant if I so wish it. Do you understand?"

Tick expected her to get defensive, but she merely nodded.

"I'm very disappointed to see both of you sitting here," Chu continued. "I'd expected at least one of you to have the vicious instinct of survival within you, the willingness to win my contest no matter the cost. Only one can win. Only one *will* win. One, or none—I can always scratch the two of you and start all over."

Tick couldn't take his eyes off Chu. It was unsettling how he looked *exactly* like his teacher back in Deer Park. And to see this mean, nasty personality stuffed inside the image of one of his favorite people in the world was very disturbing.

"Isn't it an even greater accomplishment that we *both* made it?" Jane asked. "That such bitter enemies could reconcile enough to work together for a common cause?"

"All I see is cowardice," Chu replied, wrinkling up his nose as if such a notion disgusted him more than anything else. "If you don't have the strength, will, or ability to kill this young man, then I certainly don't want you by my side." He shifted his gaze to Tick. "And you—don't think you've accomplished anything great. Much tougher tests lie ahead."

Chu paused, looking back and forth between Tick and Jane. “Still . . . I need an apprentice, and my patience has run out. Like I said, one or none. You’ll both come with me and settle the matter.”

Tick finally found the voice that had been locked in a trap of panic inside him. “What do you mean? What are you going to do to us?”

Chu laughed, the humorless laugh of a man who just found out he has mere days to live. “I’m not going to do anything to you. You’ll do it to each other.”

“But what—” Tick stopped when Chu held up a hand.

“Don’t say another word. You will follow me, both of you. And don’t be stupid—I have more weapons hidden in this place than you could count in a week’s time. Try anything against me, and you will die. If my sensors detect any spikes in Chi’karda levels within you, you will die. At least until we get to the chamber. Tonight, you’ll sleep. I want you well-rested for the morning. Come.”

He turned and walked toward the opposite side of the room, though there was no sign of a door. “Now!” he shouted.

Mistress Jane stood up and motioned for Tick to come with her after Chu. Heart thumping, Tick fell in line beside her. His head swam with confusion. Both of these people were supposed to be his enemy!

He and Jane stayed twenty feet behind Chu, walking just fast enough to keep the distance consistent. Chu didn’t slow when he came within a few paces of the curved wall, and just before he walked right into it, everything went pitch-black for a full three seconds. Tick almost stopped, but Jane grabbed his hand, pulling him along before letting him go.

Lights flickered above them, then ahead of them, flashing as if gaining power before finally shining at full strength. They strode down a long hallway with a carpeted floor of brown-and-black diamonds, the white walls lined with pictures of various instruments and odd scientific experiments— beakers and wires and microscopes and animals in small cages. It gave Tick the creeps.

He looked back and the hallway stretched just as far in that direction as it did before them, as if they’d never been inside the large, round room made of illuminated white material. It surprised him when he realized he *wasn’t* surprised. He wondered if anything would seem crazy or magical to him ever again.

Jane reached over and grabbed his wrist. “Listen to me,” she whispered.

Tick didn’t want to trust her, but he nodded anyway, as slightly as he could in case they were being watched.

“When the time is right,” she said, speaking so softly Tick had to strain his ears, “we’ll strike. You and I together. Remember—no matter what you think

of me, right here, right now, we have to stop him, or Dark Infinity will make every last Reality an insane asylum.”

“*Strike?*” Tick whispered back. “What do you expect from *me*? I don’t know what you guys think I can do, but I don’t have any powers and I can barely lift fifty pounds.”

Jane shook her head in anger. “Grow up, Atticus. Are you really that dense? Even I’ve noticed the things you’ve done the last couple of weeks.”

Tick looked over at her. “What are you talking about?” He winced; his voice was way too loud.

“Just stay close. Trust me—your abilities will come out. And when they do, I’ll channel them against Chu.”

Tick almost stumbled. The floor seemed to bounce with ripples as he felt his head swim. “I don’t get what you’re—”

Jane held a finger to her lips and picked up the pace. The hallway stretched to infinity before them.

Tick kept walking.

For the first time in a long time, Paul felt like he might not die of pain after all. Doctor Hillenstat, a wiry old man with a droopy mustache and enormous teeth from the Second Reality, had barely said a word after Rutger had winked him in to work on Paul’s arm. Paul had been grateful for the silence, because he’d been in no mood to talk.

The pain worsened before it got better, but once the medicine kicked in and the bone settled in the thin white cast, life became bliss. Despite everything—the near-death experiences and the disappearance of his good friend Tick—Paul felt on top of the world after having suffered for so long.

Now, still lying on the soft bed in the infirmary, he decided he better pay attention to the frantic discussions going on between the people sitting in chairs around him—Master George, Rutger, Mothball, Sally, Sofia, and Doctor Hillenstat, who’d insisted on staying around until he was sure Paul was on the mend.

“All right, Sofia,” Master George said after shushing everyone from talking over each other. “The matter of greatest concern at the moment is this: the odd *melding* of materials you saw on several occasions these past weeks. I want you to take a minute now, think about it very hard, picture it in your mind exactly as it was, and tell us every detail. Can you do that for us?”

Sofia rolled her eyes. “How many times . . .” She didn’t finish, Master George having given her his gentlemanly stare of death, eyebrows raised. “Fine, okay.”

“Splendid,” Master George whispered, rubbing his hands together as he

leaned forward in his chair.

Sofia took a second before running through it all again. “The first time it happened was back at Tick’s hometown. We were in the woods, and we met that psycho teacher of his, Mr. Chu. He strapped the things on our arms—”

Master George interrupted her. “I’m certain that was Reginald Chu from the Fourth, not Tick’s science instructor. And the thing he put around your arm was a highly illegal device called a nanohijacker. If we ever catch Chu, he’ll be punished severely and spend the rest of his days in a Realitant prison.” His face reddened. “So sorry, please continue.”

“The . . . nanohijacker hurt worse than anything I’ve felt in my entire life,” Sofia said, her face grimacing at the memory. “We heard loud crashing sounds in the woods, and Chu told us something was coming to get us. Well, the pain made us all pass out and when we woke up, dozens of trees had been smashed together—almost like they’d melted. We even saw a couple of deer in the mess.”

“Hope it wasn’t the wee one I saw last year,” Mothball said. “Sprightly little thing, it was.”

Sofia gave her a confused look then continued. “In the weird underground place, a bunch of robot things called metaspides attacked us, but they all got melded together, too. There was a big tornado and they turned into one big heap of junk.”

“That was the Industrial Barrens in the Seventh Reality,” Master George said. “Miserable place. And those metaspides are Chu’s security force. I didn’t know he’d sent them to the Seventh. We’ve had trouble with those buggers before. Go on.”

“It happened two more times,” Sofia said. “In the desert, a huge beast catapulted through the tunnel right before it was going to kill us—and got trapped in a big chunk of melted glass. I think some of the glass might have been created from the super-heated sand. The last time was when we were running from the glowing . . . *monkeys* near Circle City and a bunch of trees smashed together again, killing a few of the animals. It looked just like it had back in Deer Park—like the wood had liquefied and twisted together, then solidified into one massive structure. Like it was something from a nightmare.”

Sofia stopped and looked at the floor.

Master George patted her arm and leaned back in his chair. “Thank you, my dear. Yes, yes, I’m quite certain my suspicions are correct. Quite certain, indeed. I fear our problems are much deeper than we thought. Oh, goodness gracious me.”

“What?” Paul said, his joy and relief from the vanished pain fading at the haunted look that crossed Master George’s face. “How could it possibly be

worse? What are you talking about?”

“It’s Tick,” Rutger grumbled. “It’s Tick.”

Sofia’s head shot up. “What do you mean, *it’s Tick?*”

Master George stood, any sign of the jolly old English gentleman gone, his face set in a stony expression of concern.

“Master Atticus is out of control,” he said. “He’s obviously not even aware of the power that’s bursting from him. Tick’s inexplicable abilities over the Chi’karda are completely and absolutely out of control. It appears he’s *manipulating* matter on the quantum level—destroying it, reshaping it, restructuring it. It seems to be triggered when he is frightened or angry. I cannot stress enough the danger of such a thing.”

Paul felt like someone had just ripped his brain out, stomped on it, then shoved it back in his skull. “You mean *Tick* did all that weird stuff with the trees . . . and the glass . . . ?”

“Quite right, Master Paul, quite right. Now imagine an out-of-control Atticus in the vicinity of Chu and his Dark Infinity device.” Master George brought a hand to his chin and shuddered. “My fellow Realitants, we now have a new number-one priority. Tick must be stopped at all costs, or he might trigger a chain reaction that could destroy every last Reality. We need to bring him back here, where we can figure things out.”

He paused. “Again, I can’t stress it enough: Atticus Higginbottom must be stopped.”

Part

4

The New Mistress Jane

A Time for Slumber

Tick was exhausted by the time Chu stopped and turned to face them. The hallway continued on for as far as Tick could see, but Chu opened a hidden passage to his right by placing the palm of his hand on a square section of a metal wall. A hissing noise sounded as the panel slid to the right and disappeared, revealing a long corridor with doors spaced at regular intervals on either side—maybe forty in all. The doors were made of wood but had no handles.

“It’s late,” Chu said, motioning the two of them to step into the new hallway. “You’ll both be confined to a cell for the night, where I expect you to get sufficient rest for tomorrow’s events. Much will be decided when the sun rises, and before it sets, one of you will be dead. Or both. Think on that as you sleep.”

Tick fought the sudden urge to push Chu out of the way and run. Oddly, he wanted Mistress Jane to yell at Chu, to use her powers against the creepy man. With a lump in his throat, Tick realized that the woman Master George had deemed the most evil to ever live had become his ally and his only hope. It sickened him, and he didn’t know how he could ever sleep.

“I could use a good night’s rest,” Jane said, stepping into the corridor as she ran a hand through her black hair. “Which one is my room?”

Chu made a quick gesture and a door on either side popped open, swinging outward. The hallway was narrow enough for him to reach out and grab both doors, holding them open. “The lady to my right, the boy to my left. You’ll find food, a shower, fresh clothes—everything you need. But *rest* is your priority. In you go.”

Tick looked at Mistress Jane, but she didn’t return his glance. She simply nodded to Chu and entered her room. Chu slammed the door closed; it sealed with a hiss.

“In, boy,” he said.

From somewhere within him, courage swelled in Tick’s chest. “You won’t win. The Realitants know everything, and they’ll be coming for you.”

Chu glanced at the leather satchel slung over Tick’s shoulder, his eyes lingering.

Stupid! Tick thought. *You shouldn’t have said anything!*

“In, boy,” Chu repeated.

This time, Tick kept his mouth shut and quickly entered the room. He’d barely crossed the threshold when the door slammed shut behind him.

“It’s very late,” Master George said, walking at such a brisk pace down the dark hallway that Paul had to jog to keep up with him and the others. “But before we slumber, I must show you one last thing. Tomorrow is perhaps the biggest day any of us will ever face—and I want you to know exactly what’s at stake.”

He paused in front of a steel door with a heavy bolt thrust through its lock. He reached out and slid a small, two-inch peephole open, the scrape of metal piercing the air.

“I want each of you to look in here, for as long as you can stand it. Then we will speak one last time before we say good night.”

Master George stepped aside and gestured for Sofia to go first.

As she peeked through the small slot, Paul saw her body go rigid, her hands clenched into tight fists. She finally looked away after several seconds.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” she yelled, looking accusingly at everyone in turn. “What’s wrong with him?”

Paul pushed past her and looked through the hole in the door. His breath caught when he saw Sato, his arms and legs strapped to a bed in several places. Despite the number of constraints, he still thrashed about madly, ropes of veins bulging under his skin, his face red from the effort. Dark bruises and scrapes marked where he fought against the straps.

His lips moved as he screamed something, spit flying, but a wall of glass between the door and the bed trapped the sound in and Paul couldn’t hear a word. Paul didn’t know if he’d ever seen something so heartbreaking. He finally stepped back, wondering if the image would ever leave his mind.

“What’s wrong with him?” he whispered.

“Yeah, what’s wrong with him!” Sofia shouted.

Master George took a deep breath. “Sato was infected with the Dark Infinity plague—the very thing Tick has been sent to destroy with the antidote. You need to know that Sato displayed a supreme effort of sacrifice and courage to bring us the sample we required. But even more important, you need to know there are thousands, perhaps millions, who are in the same state as this poor boy.”

Paul and Sofia locked eyes, not saying a word, but sharing the horror of what they’d just seen. *Sato*, Paul thought. *Oh, man, Sato*.

“As you can see,” Master George said, “we have a lot of problems on our hands. We have sent in as our only hope a boy who has a power that could destroy everything around him if he loses control. We have a plague of insanity sweeping through the Realities. And it all could come to a head tomorrow.”

“So what do we need to do?” Sofia said, not so much a question as a statement.

“Yeah,” Paul said to show his support.

Rutger answered. “Tonight, we get some sleep—everyone needs rest. Plus, we’re still waiting for some of the others to arrive.”

“The others?” Paul asked.

Master George stepped forward and took a look through the peephole at Sato. After a long moment, he turned and faced the group, his face solemn.

“Tomorrow, we send an army of Realitants to the Fourth Reality.”

Tick lay in the small bed, the covers pulled up to his chin, staring at the ceiling he couldn’t see because of the darkness. Full of delicious food, freshly showered, dressed in a nice set of flannel pajamas, he kept his eyes open, staring at the blackness hanging above him like the void of deep space.

Tears trickled down his temples, into his hair and ears. Never, not once in his entire life, had he felt so utterly alone. He finally squeezed his eyes shut, sending another surge of wetness across his skin. He concentrated, picturing each member of his family one by one. His dad, hooting and running in place as his guy scored a touchdown in Football 3000. His mom, baking cookies, tasting dough on her finger. Lisa, talking on the phone, sticking her tongue out. Kayla, her eyes glued to a Winnie the Pooh cartoon on TV.

Then he thought of Sofia. And Paul. Sato. Mothball and Rutger. Master George and Sally.

And then the image of Mr. Chu popped in his head. Not the evil one, not the one who looked at him like he was nothing but trash. The Mr. Chu in his mind was the good and kind one, the one who loved science like a kid loves candy. The man who’d devoted his life to helping students gain an understanding of the world and how it works, to help prepare them for life. To plant a seed in future doctors, engineers, chemists, biologists.

What happened to you? Tick thought. *What did . . . he do to you?*

Despite everything, Tick felt a little better. No matter what happened tomorrow, he would always have his friends and family in his heart and mind. And then a thought hit him: he should quit feeling sorry for himself—those people he’d just been thinking of *needed* him. Though he had no idea what to expect when morning came, he had to face it and do whatever it took to win. Everything depended on Tick.

Finally, the events of the day caught up to him. To think he’d awakened that morning in a place called Circle City, hoping to figure out a clue that seemed so silly now. Could this really have been only one day? It had to be the longest day of his life. And he felt it.

As exhaustion pulled him into sleep, he had one last coherent thought.
Tomorrow, I'm going to win.

Weaponry

For some odd reason, Paul was dreaming he'd just been sworn in as President of the United States, but everyone in the huge crowd booed and threw rotten tomatoes at him. One hit him square in the face, wet and gooey.

He woke up to see yellow eyes and the flicker of a tongue. Muffintops had been sent to get him out of bed.

"Get off me, you furry rat," he said, pushing the cat aside. He groaned as he pulled himself to a sitting position—his casted arm almost felt stronger than the other one—and swung his legs to the floor. Muffintops glared at him, her yellow eyes regarding him with distaste.

"Sorry, dude," Paul said, reaching down to pet her. "I'm grumpy when I wake up." He looked at his watch: 5:00 am. "Ah, man, what's up with that? Muffins, go tell the old man I'm not ready to get up."

The cat hissed and clawed at Paul's foot.

"Holy lumps of stew," Paul whispered. "You are one smart kitty. Fine, I'll get up. Go scratch Sofia's face for awhile."

They'd slept in a room similar to the one in the Bermuda Triangle complex—plain cots and blankets, no decorations. Mothball, Rutger, and Sally had slept there as well, but they were already out of bed and gone. While eating a scrumptious meal of pork chops and mashed potatoes the night before, Master George had told them he couldn't wait to move the main operations back to the ocean, but they still needed more time to make repairs and rebuild after Mistress Jane's attack back in May.

Paul stretched and yawned, then laughed when he heard Sofia yelling at the cat. He quickly ran to get in the shower before Sofia claimed it.

After breakfast, Master George summoned everyone to the meeting hall, where Paul was shocked to see dozens of people he'd never met before. He and Sofia took a seat while scanning the room, gaping at the strange visitors.

Tall people and short people, skinny people and muscled people. The clothing varied—everything from a large dude with a fancy robe containing every color possible to a slender woman with pale skin and red hair dressed head to toe in black. There was a guy with a turban, a woman with a baseball cap, another woman with a hat the size of a sombrero but decorated with tiny stuffed animals. Quite a few of the strangers wore what Paul considered normal clothes—jeans, flannel shirts, golf shirts, casual blouses, T-shirts—but

the ones who didn't stood out like huge chunks of coal in a bowl of vanilla ice cream.

A tall man with night-dark skin had eyes so blue they seemed to pulse and glow. He wore a one-piece suit with shreds of cloth hanging off like mummy wrappings. A woman sat three chairs down from him with bleached-blond hair, her face painted in the fanciest makeup job Paul had ever seen—bright red lips, purple eye shadow, lines of blue streaking across her temple like colored wrinkles. She'd drawn a star on one cheek and a crescent moon on the other. Next to her was a man almost as short as Rutger but not nearly so fat, wearing a white shirt, white pants, and white socks and shoes.

"Who are these people?" Sofia whispered to Paul.

"Other Realitants, I guess," he replied.

Sofia tapped the cast that covered his forearm from just below his elbow to his wrist. "How's that broken bone of yours?"

"Feels great, actually." He held up his arm and punched the air a couple of times. "Especially compared to how I felt yesterday. Can't wait to whack Chu upside the head with this puppy."

"You think Master George will let you go?"

Paul glared at her. "I'd like to see him stop me."

Sofia rolled her eyes. "Ooh, you're such a tough guy."

"Tougher than you," Paul muttered, but flinched backward when Sofia made a fist to punch him. "Calm it, girl! You're the boss, you're the boss."

Sofia folded her arms and pouted. "We shouldn't be acting like idiots. Tick's in all kinds of trouble, I know it."

Paul felt his heart sink to the floor. "Yeah," was all he could get out. The room felt as if a dark cloud had formed on the ceiling, dimming everything to a dull gray.

"Can I sit next to ya knuckleheads?"

Paul looked up to see Sally. "Sure."

He and Sofia scooted over, letting him have the aisle seat.

"Thank ya much," Sally said with a grunt as he plopped down. "Gonna be one heckuva day, ain't it?"

"Guess so," Paul said.

"What's the plan?" Sofia asked.

Before Sally could reply, a door opened and Master George came marching through, Mothball and Rutger close behind. Both of them carried wooden boxes.

Master George stepped up to the small podium while his two assistants set their boxes down. Mothball's was the size of two coffins and looked like it weighed a thousand pounds. Rutger's was as small as a shoebox, but sweat

poured down his red face and he sucked in two dramatic breaths when he dropped his box on the floor with a loud clonk.

Master George gave him a stern look, then turned toward the audience. “Good morning to you all, and thank you so much for being here. Coming on such extreme short notice mustn’t have been easy, I’m sure. But a dreadful time has come upon us, and we must act quickly. We will need everyone in this room, without exception.”

He took a breath, then folded his hands together on top of the podium. “You were all briefed on the circumstances in our message to you, but I want to stress the most important issues of the day. The Dark Infinity plague is wreaking havoc among the Realities as we speak, but we’re very close to a solution. Realitant Second Class Atticus Higginbottom is armed with a powerful antidote that will shatter the source device and send out a cure through the quantum Chi’karda waves Chu has been using to control those he has infected. Thanks to Rutger’s tireless work, I have no doubt it will be a success.”

Several people in the room clapped, and Rutger did his best to bow, though it looked like a beach ball trying to bend in the middle.

“But unfortunately,” Master George continued, “we have an even bigger problem. Master Atticus has a power over Chi’karda that is extraordinary—far greater than we’d first thought and far more complex and difficult to grasp. It’s out of control, and the potential for disaster is extreme. It is vital that we find him, stop him, and bring him back here for a comprehensive study. I must say, as much as I admire the boy, he’s frightened the dickens out of me, and I don’t know what to think of it.”

The man in the colorful robe raised his hand, and Master George pointed to him. “So what ye thinking on the plan? How do we make sure we flash out the plague and save the boy from killing us all?”

Master George nodded. “Yes, Master Hallenhafer, how indeed? Though we haven’t had much time to prepare, we do have a plan. Rutger?”

The short fat man cleared his throat. “Tick’s ear transponder confirms what we’ve guessed—he’s been taken to the heart of Reginald Chu’s business palace in the Fourth Reality. No doubt the Dark Infinity device is located there in his research and development chamber underground. We’ve had spies in the Chu complex for many years, saving them for the day we’d need them most. Today is that day.”

“Sha people!” the dark-skinned man in the mummy suit shouted. “Sha to do such a linka?”

Paul exchanged a look with Sofia, having no idea what the guy was talking about.

“Yeah,” a brown-haired woman said, dressed in a T-shirt and blue jeans.

“What good are a few spies against Chu and all his weapons?”

Rutger held up his pudgy hands. “You’re right, you’re right. Our spies may only be good for opening a door here, smashing a window there, perhaps rearranging some schedules of workers if they can. No, we’re not saying we’re going to enter the heart of Chu’s lair because of a few spies. But they *will* help.”

“Then what’s the plan?” Sofia yelled out, surprising Paul.

Rutger looked at her, then scanned the full audience. “We’ll have to, I mean, all of *you* will have to *fight* your way in.”

A small roar sounded from the crowd as everyone started talking at once. A couple of people stood up, shouting at Rutger.

Master George slammed a hand against the podium, sending a sharp crack of thunder echoing across the room, silencing the Realitants.

“Please, good people,” Master George said. “Don’t get in a tizzy before you’ve heard the entire plan. Many of us have spent our entire summer working on developing our weapons program, and we’ve come up with some dandies, I assure you.”

Paul looked at Sofia. “Weapons? Sweet!”

Rutger spoke next. “In these boxes are samples of our latest inventions, most of them based on items taken from the Fourth. We have enough to equip an army of thirty-two Realitants, and we think that will be enough to get us to Tick and the Dark Infinity device. And, if I may be so bold as to express my professional opinion, these things are going to kick some serious . . . um . . . er . . .”

“Booty!” Paul shouted.

“Exactly!” Rutger pointed at Paul, grinning. “Now, shall we begin?” He plopped down onto his knees and opened the small shoebox. He reached in and pulled out a tiny, dark ball, about the size of a marble. He held it up between his thumb and forefinger. “This, my friends, is called a Static Rager, and it’s not something you’d want to use for playing catch with little nephew Tommy.”

“Unless you be wantin’ little Tommy to be eaten by a forty-ton ball of dirt,” Mothball added. “Nasty buggers, those are. Could’ve used ’em on the Bugaboo soldiers.”

Paul leaned over to Sofia. “Now *this* is what I’m talking about!”



Mothball pulled a silver device from her bigger box. It was several inches thick, cylindrical, about two-and-a-half feet long, and had several tubes running down the sides, all coming together in a tapered point at the front; two straps of cloth hung from it.

“This ’ere’s a Sonic Hurricaner,” she said, hefting it up for everyone to get a good look. “Call ’em Shurricks for short. Makes the old Sound Slicer look like a BB gun, it does. Come on, ’ave a look.”

“Yes, yes,” Master George said. “Come up, gather round. We have much more to show you and not enough time. Demonstrations will take place at the

canyon bottom shortly. Departure for the Fourth is in three hours. Chop-chop!" He waved his arm toward Mothball and Rutger's boxes.

Paul was the first one to get there.

A Thin Sheet of Plastic

Tick's eyes snapped open.

He shot into a sitting position, wondering what had awakened him. Had it been a noise? Did something touch him? He scanned the small room but saw nothing out of place—except for the lamp shining brightly on the dresser. That was it. Someone had turned the light on.

Man, he thought. My brain must still be asleep.

A tiny closet offered the only hiding place, and it was barely large enough to fit a little kid. He kicked off his blankets and walked over to the closet, then ripped the door open. Nothing but a pile of his old clothes and a few fresh shirts and pants.

Sighing, he stumbled backward and flopped onto the bed. *Chu created something that controls people's minds in other Realities, he thought. Making a lamp turn on to wake me up is nothing.*

After another minute, he stood, rubbed his eyes and stretched, then started undressing to put on some of the fresh clothes in the closet. As he slipped into a long-sleeved gray shirt and black pants that were as comfortable as sweats, he felt an icy chill in his chest. He had absolutely no idea what to expect or what to do.

He put on his own tennis shoes, slung the leather satchel over his shoulder, and stepped up to the door. There was no handle, just a dull slab of smooth beige material. He reached out, but before his hand made contact, the door clicked and moved, swinging out into the narrow hall. Pale lights in the hall revealed that Mistress Jane's door was also open; her room was dark.

Tick wanted to say something, ask for help, run. He expected someone to come for him, to summon him to Chu. But as far as he could tell, the whole place was deserted.

He stepped out of his room, then peeked around the door. The main door leading into the long hallway was open. It was dark out there, too—darker than it had been last night. He walked into the hall and glanced in both directions. Small emergency lights cast pale semicircles of red that didn't even reach the floor—anything could be hiding in the shadows.

What's going on? he thought.

He started walking to the right, sliding the tips of his fingers along the wall. He heard a faint buzzing from the lights; the air smelled like plastic and computer machinery. He'd only made it a hundred steps or so when a shadow formed ahead of him, the figure of a person leaning against the wall.

“Who’s there?” Tick asked.

“It’s me,” a female voice whispered. Mistress Jane.

Surprisingly, Tick felt a wave of relief splash over him. “What are you doing? What are we supposed to do?”

Jane pushed herself away from the wall and walked toward Tick, stopping beneath one of the emergency lights. It cast an eerie red glow on her black hair and down her face, creased with angled shadows under her eyes and nose and mouth. Tick pushed away the thought that she looked like she was covered in blood.

“What are we supposed to *do*?” she repeated. “We’re supposed to kill each other.”

Tick felt a chill at the simplicity of the statement, but he knew she was right. “That’s it? He’s just going to wait around until we follow his orders and fight to the death?”

“Looks like it,” Jane said. She held out a piece of paper. “This was taped to the front of both of our doors—looks like you missed yours.”

Tick took the note from her; the paper had an odd roughness to it. Jane tucked a strand of black hair behind her ear, staring at the floor. Tick’s gaze lingered on her for a second—and he thought for the first time that she was one of the prettiest women he’d ever seen. He snapped his eyes away, focusing on the note in his hands.

She’s evil, Tick, he told himself. Evil people aren’t supposed to be pretty.

He could barely see the paper so he held it up closer to the light. To his surprise, he saw it wasn’t paper at all, but rather an extremely thin piece of plastic. Electronic, glowing green letters scrawled across its face one by one, just like someone typing a message on a computer screen:

There are no instructions. No rules. Nothing is forbidden. When only one of you remains, please walk to the end of the hallway outside your dormitory. Go to the right. You have until noon, or you both die.

“We have three hours,” Jane said when Tick looked up from the note.

“Someone’s done lumped you over the ’ead with a teapot, they ’ave,” Mothball said, glaring down at Paul with her thin arms folded. “You’ve got a ruddy broken arm.”

“I don’t care,” Paul said. He flexed his fingers while moving his arm up and down. “It’s set. It feels fine. I’m going.”

They stood with Rutger and Sofia next to the armory door; the other Realitants going to the Fourth had already received all they needed.

“Now’s not a time for false bravery,” Rutger said. “This makes your trip to

steal the Barrier Wand from Mistress Jane look like a nice stroll down a country lane. This is serious business, and it's highly doubtful everyone will return alive—if anyone does.”

Paul opened his mouth then closed it, swallowing a sudden lump in his throat. He looked over at Sofia. “You're going, right?”

“Of course I am,” she replied, looking awfully bored considering what was about to happen.

Paul turned back to Mothball and Rutger. “Then I'm going too.”

Mothball surprised him with her booming laugh. “So be it, then. Won't be me goin' to tell yer mum you've been sliced to bits by one of Chu's nasties. Come on.”

She stooped to enter the room; Rutger waved Paul and Sofia through before he followed.

The armory was large but cramped with several aisles of metal-grid shelves rising from floor to ceiling, packed with an odd assortment of menacing objects. Some looked like guns, but most resembled trinkets and gadgets from a futuristic toy store: metal shafts with glass spheres attached to one end; awkward chunks of machinery with no rhyme or reason, like 3-D puzzles; cool watches with all kinds of dials and switches, but no timepiece; countless small devices that gave no clue as to their purpose.

“Where was all this stuff when we went to the Thirteenth?” Sofia asked.

“Most of it's junk,” Mothball replied. “Experiments and such that couldn't hurt a fly on a toad paddie. Sound Slicers were our best bet then.”

“Over here,” Rutger called from a couple of aisles down.

Paul almost stumbled over Sofia as they both hurried toward Rutger. The short man pointed up to a shelf holding the same large cylindrical objects Mothball had shown them earlier, with several tubes that tapered to a point on the end, straps hanging off both sides.

“Those are the Shurricks,” Rutger said. “Sonic Hurricaners. Grab two of them, Paul.”

Paul reached out—the shelf was at his eye level—and pulled two of the weapons down. They were much lighter than he'd expected, and he handed one to Sofia before examining his own.

“The two straps go around your shoulders and across your back,” Rutger explained. “It keeps the wide end flat against your chest while you activate the trigger mechanism in your hand.” He pointed to a small plastic rod jutting from the bottom of the Shurric with a red button in the middle, just like a joystick. “It'll leave your other hand free to throw nasty horrible things at the enemy. This way.”

He walked farther down the same aisle then turned left, where several large black boxes lined the bottom shelf. “Those little marbles are the Static

Ragers. We just call them Ragers for short since Stragers is hard to say and sounds really stupid.”

“What do they do?” Paul asked.

“You won’t believe it until you see it,” Rutger said with a huge smile of pride on his fat face. “They have static electricity compacted inside them under extreme pressure. After you squeeze the suckers with your fist, you have five seconds to throw them. Once unleashed, the Rager uses the lightning-strong static inside to gather hundreds of pounds of materials to it—dirt and rocks and plants, whatever—like the world’s worst snowball as it rolls, growing larger and larger until it smashes into something.”

“Nasty little things,” Mothball muttered. She pointed at Rutger. “This little ball of lard just about smushed me into a hotcake, he did, testin’ the buggers. Not much can stop ’em once they get movin’ and such.”

“How many times do I have to apologize!” Rutger said with a frown. “It wasn’t *my* fault you decided to relieve yourself in the weeds, now was it?”

Mothball’s face reddened, something Paul was sure he’d never seen before.

“What else do you have?” Sofia asked.

Rutger shook his head. “That’s it, I’m afraid, at least for you two. Some of the others have more . . . *specialized* weapons, prototypes and such.”

“Ah, dude, why can’t I have one of those?” Paul asked. “Specialized weapons are my speciality.” He grinned.

Mothball swatted Paul on the shoulder. “Zip it. You’re lucky you’re goin’ at all.”

“Before you leave,” Rutger said, “we’ll make sure the Shurricks get strapped on properly and give you a sturdy bag for your Ragers. But it’s time to go down to the canyon floor—Master George wants everyone to test things out before leaving, which gives us just over an hour.”

He started pushing past Paul to head out of the room, but stopped and looked up at Sofia. “Ah, I almost forgot. Master George has something very special he wants to give you. I have to admit I was surprised at his choice, but he said he felt strongly that you should be the one entrusted to use it.”

Sofia’s raised eyebrows, creased forehead, and greedy grin made her look half-shocked and half-thrilled. “What is it?”

Rutger exchanged a long look with Mothball, neither of them showing much expression or saying a word.

Finally, Rutger said, “On second thought, we better let Master George explain it to you. Come on, let’s go down the elevator to the canyon floor.”

A Cloud of Stars

Do you trust me, Atticus?”

Tick looked at Mistress Jane, almost expecting her to laugh and say she was kidding. They’d been standing in silence for at least ten minutes since reading the Note of Doom. “What kind of stupid question is that? You’re a traitor, and you really seem to like hurting and killing people. No, I don’t trust you.”

Jane scowled, the pale red light making her look like a devil. “Fair enough. Then answer this—do you trust Reginald Chu?”

That made Tick think. “Well, no. He’s as bad as you.”

“Listen to me,” Jane said. “I know I can’t convince you I’m a fairy godmother who loves to make cookies and play hide-and-seek with children. But you’re a smart boy. Think about our situation. No matter the troubles between us—between me and the Realitants—we have a bigger problem, right here, right now. We have to stop Chu before he causes every last person in the Realities to go insane. And I need your help.”

Tick threw his arms up in frustration. “Need my help? You keep saying that. Yeah, somehow I winked people out of the Thirteenth and—” He stopped, not wanting to tell her about how last spring he’d made the burned letter from Master George reappear. “But it was probably just a freak thing and will never happen again. Plus, what good will that do us? You want me to wink you somewhere like I’m some kind of human Barrier Wand?”

Mistress Jane grabbed her black hair that lay over her shoulder and gripped it in her fist like a ponytail. “Atticus, you’re either a brilliant actor or not quite as wise as I thought.”

“What are you talking about?”

Jane reached out and poked him in the chest. “Your whole body *exudes* Chi’karda. It practically glows on your skin. You’re like a supercharged battery just waiting to unleash your power. I’ve never seen anything like it, and you can’t tell me you don’t feel it.”

Tick suddenly felt very ill, and all he could do was shake his head.

“I visited some of the places Chu sent you to—after you were gone. Back when I was still deciding whether or not to kill you as he’d challenged me to do. How could you have done those terrible things and *not* realize you’d done it?”

“I have no idea what—”

“Please!” Jane shouted. “The twisted trees, the melted glass with a huge

creature stuck in the middle—what do you think did that? A stiff hot wind? It was you!”

Tick felt too weak to stand anymore. He slid down the wall as his knees bent; his rear end thumped onto the hard floor. “What do you . . . I don’t . . . you’re nuts. That’s not possible.”

Jane crouched down until her face was level with his, reddish-green eyes shining through her glasses. “You really had no idea, did you? It was *you*, Atticus, it was you. Extreme amounts of Chi’karda are flowing through you like pulsing electricity, and you have no control over it.”

Tick found he couldn’t speak, his throat constricted. But he shook his head. Emotions swirled inside him—anger, confusion, disbelief. Panic. He’d done all those things? He didn’t want to have some kind of weird power over Chi’karda, he didn’t want the pressure, he didn’t want to be *here*.

He felt hot, as if his heart pumped out boiling water. His mind *burned*.

Then everything seemed to go crazy at once.

A loud bang echoed down the hallway; the walls and floor shook as if a thousand pounds of dynamite had just been detonated below them. Mistress Jane cried out and fell backward, slamming her head against the wall. Tick sprawled across the floor, rolling as if the whole building had been tilted on its side. The floor gave way beneath him, dropping with another loud boom. Tick plummeted several feet and landed awkwardly on his arm. As he twisted it out from under his body, he looked up in time to see a wave ripple down the hallway like a massive mole burrowing its way underground.

As the ripple disappeared into the darkness, the building shook again, but this time constant and steady, rocking back and forth, an earthquake. Tick scooted back against the wall, looking around, not knowing what to do.

Jane got up on her hands and knees, shaking her head as she bounced up and down with the moving floor.

“What’s happening?” Tick yelled.

Jane didn’t answer, crawling toward him as best she could, getting back up each time she fell. A huge lurch sent her rocketing forward. She crashed into Tick and grabbed his arms to steady herself.

“What’s happening?” Tick repeated.

Jane shifted until she was side by side with him, her back against the wall. She put her left arm around his shoulder and grabbed his hand with her right. She tilted his head toward her and started whispering in his ear, caressing his hair like a mother trying to console her child.

“Listen to me, Atticus, listen to me. Take a deep breath. Calm yourself. I promise you I won’t let anything hurt you. Calm yourself, *breathe*.” She pulled his head down onto her shoulder. “Everything’s okay, everything’s okay. Close your eyes, breathe—everything’s going to be okay.”

Everything was a blur to Tick, shaking and rattling. He did as Jane told him, closing his eyes, sucking in deep breaths, surprised at the calm warmth that spread through him despite the chaos. Jane continued to stroke his hair, whispering words of safety in his ears.

As quickly as it had begun, the shaking stopped and all was silent except a creak or two as the building settled. Tick heard himself breathing, felt his chest rising and falling, felt the comforting touch of Jane. The thought repulsed him, but he didn't move.

"Open your eyes," Jane said, gently pushing his head off her shoulder.

Tick did, and gasped at what he saw in front of him.

A misty mass of bright orange sparkles floated in the air, a condensed cloud several feet wide, hovering and pulsating slightly as if it breathed. His eyes hurt, but he couldn't look away. It seemed as if he'd been transported to deep space, viewing a nebula or a swirling galaxy.

"What . . . what is that?" he whispered.

Jane's voice was soft. "It's your Chi'karda, Atticus. I told you I could channel it if you would only unleash it for me. I can't say I understand what's happening, but it seems that when you get angered or afraid, power bursts from you, completely out of control and dangerous. If I hadn't been able to calm you, I'm not sure I would've been able to harness it and form it before us. Now, don't worry, I'm about to do something. Trust me."

The cloud moved toward Tick, the shining particles dancing in the air, darting back and forth as they surrounded him, dissipating into the darkness. He felt a surge of warmth, like walking out of a freezer into the hot desert sunshine. For a few seconds, all he could see was light, a million bright stars, swirling around him. And then it was gone.

"It's flowed back into you," Jane whispered, her voice loud in the silence. "You may never see it in that form again, but now you know what sleeps inside you. I don't want to be your enemy the day you figure out how to control it."

Tick's mind spun in countless directions, too confused and overwhelmed to grasp what had just happened or even formulate a question. "I don't get it," he said.

Jane stood up. "Neither do I, and I suspect Master George is clueless as well." She held out a hand. "Come on."

Tick took it and let her pull him up. "I'm a freak."

Jane shook her head. "No, you're not. If you're a freak, then so am I."

Tick thought of all the things he could've said to that, but he stopped himself. Jane had probably just saved his life. "What now? Looks like we're not gonna try to kill each other, I guess."

Jane looked down the hallway in the direction they'd been ordered to go

once things were settled. “No, we’re not. And we’re not waiting until noon, either. Come on.” She grabbed his hand and pulled him along as she started walking.

“Wait!” Tick called out, snapping his hand back. He searched around until he spotted the leather satchel holding the antidote. He ran over and picked it up, then joined Jane again, still marching down the hallway. “Okay, what are we going to do?”

Jane paused before answering. “You and I are going to stop Chu. Right now.”

Sofia's Task

Sofia stood by the small cave leading to the elevator shaft, leaning back against the warm stone of the dusty canyon wall. Master George had asked her to wait there until he could speak to her; at the moment, he was explaining to Paul how to use the Sonic Hurricaner, the Shurric. Sofia had picked it up easily and destroyed three huge boulders in quick succession.

The Static Ragers fascinated her, though. She watched as a Realitant woman threw one along the ground with a quick jerk of her arm. A sharp crack filled the air, then a low rumble of thunder as the Rager rolled forward, gaining speed and size with every passing second. Everything in its path—dirt, mud, rocks, bushes—compacted together in a huge chunky sphere, snowballing as it rolled. When the Rager finally smashed into a test boulder, both objects exploded in a spectacular display of earthy fireworks.

Awesome, Sofia thought. She couldn't wait to hurl one at Chu himself.

Master George was walking toward her, shouting at the Realitants scattered around the riverside. "Everyone! Back up we go. We can't spare another second!"

As the two dozen or so people gathered their weapons and headed for the elevator, Master George touched Sofia lightly on the arm, leading her out of earshot of the others.

"We must talk before you go," he said in a low voice.

"Rutger told me you had something special you wanted me to do."

Master George nodded, his mouth pursed with worry. "Indeed, my good Sofia, indeed."

When he didn't say anything more, Sofia said, "Well?"

"Ah, yes, sorry." He pulled a tiny silver pen out of his pocket and held it up for her to see. It had no distinguishing features other than a clicker at the top and a small black clasp on the side for attaching it to a shirt pocket or notebook. "I felt I must trust *you* with this. Please take it—but don't push the button."

Sofia took it from his hand and held it with only the tips of two fingers, as if its surface might contain some poison. "What is it?"

"Well, it's most certainly not a pen. Won't write a single letter, I assure you."

"I figured that much."

Master George looked troubled, his mouth opening and closing several times before he finally explained. "We expect things to be quite . . . chaotic

once you get to Chu's industrial palace. Though you must do your part to fight whatever forces Chu might throw at you, I must ask you to consider that your second priority."

"And the first?"

"Yes, yes, it's difficult to say. Sofia, I need you to run through the chaos, get past Chu's forces, and enter the main complex at all costs. Our spies will do their best to ensure the locking mechanisms and sealants are sabotaged when I give the signal. I need you to get in, locate Chu's research and development laboratories, which is where I expect Master Atticus to be, and *find* our troubled friend."

"Why? What am I supposed to do?"

"I'm afraid Tick may lose control of his powers when he confronts whatever Chu has planned for him. I fear it will be worse, far worse than anything that has happened during your adventures these past days. He may do irreparable damage—damage that could grow and trigger chain reactions, doing very nasty things to matter both there and in the other Realities if it seeps through the borders."

Sofia felt a knot tighten in her stomach even before Master George said the next part.

"You need to find him, Sofia. You need to place the tip of that pen against his neck and push the button. It will traumatize his system terribly, sending him into a coma, but it will also block his body from his mind, his emotions, his anger and fear. That should cut him off from the massive surge of Chi'karda that I expect. But I promise you, Sofia, it will not kill him."

Sofia felt a cyclone of emotions storm inside her—pride at being chosen for a special mission, fear of doing it, concern for Tick and his out-of-control powers, sadness that she'd have to inject him with something horrible. Though she felt it in her nature to argue, to push back, she didn't. Master George was right. He *had* to be right.

"Okay," she said, feeling like she should say more but unable to find the words.

Master George nodded with a satisfied look, then reached out and squeezed her shoulder. "I debated this within my heart for many hours, Sofia, as well as with Rutger and Mothball. But in the end, I knew it had to be you. It must be you. I know you will succeed, as surely as I know Muffintops is up there"—he pointed to the complex above—"hissing at every Realitant who steps off the elevator who isn't me."

Sofia smiled, then looked at the dangerous pen. Finally, she slid it into her pocket.

"Let's go up now," Master George said. "It's time to send you off."

It made Tick's stomach turn to see the warped and twisted walls of the hallway. Some of the panels had melted completely into globs of metallic goo on the floor. *I did that*, he thought. *How is that possible?* He tried as best he could to quit looking and stared straight ahead at the never-ending corridor stretching before them.

He gripped the strap of his satchel. *I have to tell her. I have to.*

"Um, Mistress Jane?"

She'd been quiet while they'd been walking; she looked over at him. "Yes? Sorry, just planning things out in my mind."

"I need to tell you something."

Her eyebrows shot up, appearing above the rim of her glasses. "Oh?"

"There's something in this bag. Something I'm supposed to use against the Dark Infinity thing. An . . . antidote."

Jane stopped, turned toward him. "An *antidote*? How did . . ." She trailed off, as if not sure what to ask.

"Master George got a sample from one of the infected people. Then he and Rutger figured out what to do. He said if I smash it against the device that's sending out the nanowaves or whatever you call the stuff that's controlling people's minds, it'll work its magic and destroy it. Somehow send the cure out to everyone. No clue how it works, but that's what I was told."

"Hmm." Jane started walking again. Tick fell in line beside her. "Well, I guess that will make our task easier. But only a little—the hard part will be getting to Dark Infinity in the first place. There's no telling how Chu's going to react when he sees us both still alive, or what weapons he'll use against us. Prepare yourself—I'm going to need every ounce of your . . . *abilities*."

Sofia stood next to Paul, both of them in the long, single-file line of Realitants about to be sent to the Fourth Reality. Mothball was with them; she said she wouldn't miss it if she had only one arm and leg. Rutger stood still and silent by the podium, looking somberly at the floor, while Master George paced back and forth, doing his best to give a pep talk.

"I needn't say much," he said, his hands clasped behind his back. "I know that all of you know the dire nature of the task ahead of you. Not only do we have a nanoplague running rampant through the Realities, but one of our own is on the verge of a catastrophic breakdown that could shatter the very substance of the Realities. Not to mention our dear friend, Sato, who is suffering so much in our own home. For them, for your families, for the people of your world and others, I ask you to do this thing."

He quit pacing and turned to face the group. “I do not ask it lightly. But I also ask that you do not *take* it lightly. I send you with my utmost confidence in your abilities and in your strengths. I send you in the good graces of Chi’karda itself. May it be strong within you on this terrible, terrible day.”

He paused for a long moment, the room completely still. Then he turned and pulled his Barrier Wand off a shelf under the podium, its golden, cylindrical surface shining, the seven dials and switches preset and ready to go.

Rutger spoke. “Though it would be easier if you were all touching it, we have too many people for that, so it’s been programmed accordingly. We’ve checked and rechecked all of your nanolocators, and replaced the hijacked ones inside Paul and Sofia. We’ll be watching you closely.”

Sofia closed her eyes and breathed deeply, trying to quell the sickening swarm of butterflies in her stomach. The tranquilizer pen in her pocket bulged, feeling twenty times bigger than it should be and weighing a hundred pounds. She fingered the strap of her bag holding the Ragers, tightened her grip on the handle of the Shurric, its straps slung over both shoulders.

I’m ready, she thought. I can do this.

“Are you scared?” Paul whispered.

“No,” she replied, hating how shaky her voice sounded when it came out.

“Me too.”

Master George held the Wand up high, then lowered it back to his eye level, holding his right index finger above the trigger on top. “My friends, we very much look forward to your safe return.”

He pushed the button.

The Dilemma of the Doors

Tick and Jane walked another twenty minutes before the long hallway finally came to an end. Large double doors marked an entrance to whatever lay beyond, heavily bolted slabs of steel with no handles or windows. A large blank square decorated one of the doors, black as pitch.

“What now?” Tick asked.

“I guess we knock,” Jane responded. She stepped up and slammed the palm of her hand against the steel several times; the muted thumps barely registered through the thick doors.

The black square ignited with colors, swirling like mixed paint until the image of Reginald Chu’s head solidified, but in 3-D. His face jutted from the flat surface, every detail of his features perfectly clear. It was almost indistinguishable from the real thing, and Tick felt the sudden urge to reach out and smack it.

“You’re trying my patience, both of you,” he said, the slight electronic static in his voice the only indication that what they saw before them was artificial. “I’m almost ready to pull the plug on this sad experiment and start anew. If neither of you have the guts to conquer the other, then you’re of no use to me.”

“What’s beyond these doors?” Jane asked coolly.

Chu’s recreated eyes glared at her. “You know how to find the answer to that question. I gave you a simple task. I watched your act of compassion when the boy lost control again—and Atticus, I assure you, it was an *act*. She knows she can’t harm you, even though you don’t know what you’re doing or how to ignite the power within you. But if she struck, my guess is that you would win—albeit with some serious collateral damage to my facilities. That’s why I put you in the underground tunnel connecting Chu Industries to the Winking Yard at Bale’s Square.”

“But we’re *here* now, Reginald,” Jane said, as though speaking to a child. “I think I know what’s beyond these doors. Aren’t you afraid of what the boy and I can do now?”

Tick didn’t like how things were going. Not at all. Was it true what Chu had said about Jane? And how could they sit there and talk about him like he was just a tool, an object, a dangerous weapon?

“I’m not afraid at all, Jane,” Chu said. “There is zero risk of Chi’karda levels spiking from you or the boy. Go ahead and try.”

Jane’s face whitened, the smirk vanishing from her face. Tick had no idea

what she was doing, but a vein at her temple bulged and her fists tightened. “What did you do?” she asked, her voice tight.

Chu almost smiled, but it was more of a grimace. “Your mutated powers gained in the Thirteenth will never—and I mean *never*—come close to matching what I can do with technology. I’ve conquered the science of Chi’karda. You’ve merely captured a fleeting anomaly that will squeak its way out in the natural order of things. You should’ve done what I asked, Jane. You should have *done* what I *asked*. It’s too late for you now.”

Tick couldn’t take it anymore, as scared and nervous as he was. “Would you two just shut up!” he yelled. “I’m a couple weeks short of fourteen—but I feel like I’m the only one around here who doesn’t act like a snot-nosed brat trying to pick a fight.”

Jane stared, unable to hide the shock at his outburst; Chu’s face remained stoic. Tick felt like his mind had split in two—one side telling him to zip it, the other reminding him that Master George and the Realitants were relying on him to find and destroy Dark Infinity. And there was only one way to do it.

“I’ll do it,” Tick continued. “I *want* to be your apprentice, so tell me what to do.”

“I already have,” Chu said, his bizarre magical face turning to face him. “You have until noon to destroy Mistress Jane. If you do, you’ll be allowed through the doors and we will begin our work together. If not, you will die. Both of you.”

Tick looked at Jane, who returned his stare. *How could I possibly hurt her? I don’t even know where to start. But I can’t let Master George down!* He fingered the strap of the satchel on his shoulder.

He looked down at his watch. “We still have an hour.”

“True,” Chu said.

“Then leave us alone.”

Chu laughed a mirthless chuckle. “If it makes you feel better, I’ll remove myself from the Imager. But don’t worry—I’ll still be watching.” His face disappeared and the screen returned to blackness.

“Atticus, I’m sorry,” Jane whispered. “I’ve never heard of a technology that blocks someone from Chi’karda. Somehow he’s kept that a secret—a formidable task, trust me.”

“I don’t get how it works,” Tick said. “Normally, can’t you just fill up with Chi’karda and do all kinds of magical stuff? Like a wizard?”

Jane rolled her eyes. “Something like that. Perhaps all I need is a pointy hat with stars and moons sewn on it.”

“And right now you can’t do anything?”

Jane shook her head, squeezed her fists again. “It’s gone, completely. I

can't feel it, can't grasp it, can't do anything. It feels like my soul has been ripped from my body."

"I don't feel any different," Tick said.

"That's because you've never controlled it or understood it. You couldn't even tell when you'd used it before—which I still find hard to believe."

Tick looked at the floor. "I might've felt something. A . . . a burning."

"Well, it doesn't matter now. We need to make a decision."

Tick knew what she was going to say. "He's watching us, you know. I doubt it will count if one of us *volunteers* to die."

"That's not what I had in mind." She gave him a creepy look—a blank stare, her eyes glazed.

Tick took a step backward before he realized what he was doing.

"I have no choice," she said, taking one step toward him. "But . . . it's for the best. Best for the Realities. I'm the only one who has a chance."

"What are you doing?" he asked, his back hitting the wall of the hallway.

Tears glistened in her eyes. One escaped and spilled down her cheek. "I'm sorry, Atticus. I'm so sorry. I have no choice but to kill you."

Fingers on Neck

Sofia's breath stuck in her throat as she stared up at the humongous structure that was Chu's headquarters.

It rose from the ground like a mountain—with a pointed peak and everything—as tall as any building she'd ever seen, stretching to her left and right until it disappeared in a slew of other offices and complexes. There were no straight lines on the structure, nothing flat, nothing symmetrical. Countless odd-shaped windows were scattered across the building's surface, most of them with lights shining through, but others were filled with dark shadows. Chu's headquarters towered over her and the other Realitants like a natural formation, a manmade mountain of glistening black stone.

Spanning the several hundred yards between them and the building was a broad expanse of grass and trees. A nice park complete with little streams, bridges, benches, and sidewalks that couldn't possibly contrast any more with the massive thing that kept it half in shadow.

"That is one cool building," Paul said beside her.

Both of them were armed with Master George's strange weapons. The bulky body of the Shurrics were strapped on and pressed against their chest, joystick trigger clasped in their hands. Paul was using his broken arm for that, since all he needed was a finger to push the button. Each carried a leather bag tightly against their left sides, directly under their arm, with a small opening for retrieving the Static Ragers.

"Yeah, it's cool," Sofia said. "I can't wait to see it crash to the ground."

The Realitants stood in a rough formation, in lines of eight, all facing the mammoth mountain of black glass. Mothball was in front, her head tilted back as she gaped at the top of Chu's palace so far above. She finally turned to face them.

"Done with speeches, we are," she said, fingering her Shurric. "Master George got us quite nice and inspired, he did. Are we ready for a bit of battle? Ready to go in there and stop the monster named Chu once and for all?"

Several Realitants shouted their agreement.

"We all know the plan," Mothball continued. "Get inside and make our way to the studies. Third lower level, section eight. Seen the map, you 'ave."

Sofia felt a cold pit in her gut, her nerves jittery. An emptiness floated somewhere inside her; she knew what she had to do. *If* she could actually find Tick.

"I 'spect Chu'll be sendin' nasties after us before long," Mothball said.

“Better get a move on.”

Her last word still hung in the air when a great boom rolled across the park, shaking the leaves on the trees. Mothball turned around sharply and Sofia rose on her tiptoes to see what had happened. Another boom shot out, then another. Several more in rapid-fire succession. Soon they were almost indistinguishable from each other.

Sofia saw holes had opened up along the front of the mountain building, big circles that were black on black, barely visible. Silvery balls shot out of them, one after the other. After a very short flight, the things landed on the grass and started . . . *changing*. They reformed and reshaped themselves, twitching as objects twirled and spun on their bodies, long appendages protruding out and reaching for the ground. There were dozens of them. No, hundreds.

“Uh-oh,” Paul said beside her.

As soon as he said it, Sofia realized what the things were.

Metaspides.

Tick had to keep reminding himself to breathe.

A long, long moment passed, he and Jane staring at each other. Her eyes flickered away now and then, as if turmoil raged inside her as she thought about what she should do. Tick tried to think of his own options. *Run* seemed like a good one, but he couldn't move, as if his feet were riveted to the floor. Then Jane's eyes refocused on him, like she'd departed her own body for a few minutes and had finally returned.

She slowly walked forward, arms coming up, outstretched and reaching for Tick, her fingers curved like claws. Tick was so baffled by her sudden change, and the almost laughable Frankenstein gait she'd chosen, that at first he didn't react. When she came within a foot, though, he snapped out of it and dodged to his right, ready to run.

With shocking speed, Jane spun and kicked her right leg out, smacking him in both shins. Tick lost his balance and dove toward the ground, just getting his hands beneath him before he crunched his nose. He started scrambling, but Jane was on top of him, grabbing both his shoulders from behind. With a jerk of her surprisingly strong arms, she flopped him over and onto his back, gripping his torso with her legs like a vice.

She clutched his face with both hands and leaned forward, putting her mouth flush against his ear, her breath hot. She whispered so low Tick could barely hear her.

“*Listen* to me. I don't think Chu can stop the Chi'karda in you—it's too strong. But I need to draw it out. *Listen* to me. I'm going to strangle you, do

you understand? I'm going to kill you unless you fight back. It's the only way, Atticus. Do you hear me? I will not stop until you die or until you let the Chi'karda explode out of you and it saves us both. *Listen* to me. I . . . am . . . going . . . to . . . kill . . . you. For your own good."

Jane pulled her face away, staring down at him with her green eyes aflame. She put both of her hands around his neck, squeezing. Panic flared inside Tick. He kicked out with his legs, beat on her arms with his fists, but she didn't budge.

"Let go of me!" he tried to yell, a guttural croak that barely came out.

Jane squeezed tighter. "Look at me, Chu!" she bellowed out, lunacy glazing her eyes. "I obeyed! I will be your apprentice!"

As pain enveloped him, as his breath left his body—squeezed from him—Tick thought distantly that he couldn't tell her intentions. *Is she really going to kill me? Is she acting? Would she really kill me?*

Her fingers closed tighter, gripping his skin, pinching the tendons and nerves. Tighter still. Tick struggled, kicking, beating her arms, thrashing beneath her. She squeezed even harder. Tick couldn't breathe, couldn't find air.

"He's almost dead!" Jane yelled. "Chu! I've won your test!"

Tick's eyes bulged and he felt his face puffing up. He heard the choking sounds torn from his own throat. Black stars formed above him, swirling in the air, growing bigger until they blackened his vision. Darkness fell upon him, complete.

Images flashed across his mind's eye almost too fast to register: his family, Sofia, Paul, the library back home, Master George, snow, school, Mr. Chu at the chalkboard, the Barrier Wand, the Grand Canyon, Rutger, Mothball . . .

I don't want to die!

Something snapped inside Tick's mind. He felt it—he *heard* it, like a branch cracked by a bolt of lightning. Heat surged through him, first warm then hot, pulsing through his veins, as if his blood had combusted into lava, *burning* him.

A piercing scream rocked the air. He realized it had come from him just as the blackness swept away, replaced by Jane's face, hovering above him as she kept trying to strangle him.

Tick screamed again.

Jane flew off him, catapulting across the hallway and slamming into the wall. An unseen force pinned her arms and legs flat as her head thrashed back and forth. The ground shook as Tick struggled for breath, gasping in air, fighting to get his arms and legs under him. Sounds of bending and breaking filled the air. He looked up to see the metal panels of the walls warping and cracking, bubbling and melting. Tremors rocked the floor, ripples surging

back and forth like waves on water, crashing into each other as large cracks rent the hard material.

Jane hadn't moved, still pinned to the wall. The chaotic sounds of destruction hurt Tick's ears. Everything had gone crazy; he couldn't take it. Somewhere inside him, he knew it was coming from him, that it was all his fault. *I'm a freak. I'm a freak!* Knowing he had this power only made it worse, panicked him further, sent his mind and thoughts reeling.

I'm going crazy, he thought. I can't do this. I can't control it! What have I done?

Chu. Reginald Chu. This was all his fault. Everything was his fault.

Tick glared at the massive double doors, the black square still blank. The world around him rocked back and forth, things breaking and crashing and melting. The heat within him intensified. He felt certain his organs were about to burn, fry to a crisp, leaving him dead.

Tick threw all of his anger and pain at the doors. At Chu.

With a terrible squeal, the doors wrenched to the sides, crunching into a mass of twisted steel, leaving a gaping, smoking hole behind. Tick caught movement out of the corner of his eye—Jane falling to the floor in a crumpled heap.

I can't do this, Tick thought. I can't do this!

Screaming, he got to his feet and ran through the twisted and broken doorway.

The Shower of Gold

A sea of metaspides littered the park outside Chu's artificial mountain, crawling along the ground with their creepy, jointed legs. Sofia found it hard to believe they were *machines* because they seemed so alive. They swarmed together in a tight pack, heading straight for the Realitants.

"Ready yourselves!" Mothball roared.

Sally stood a few people down from Sofia. He lifted his left hand into the air and shouted something completely unintelligible. But he looked ready to fight.

A small tremor abruptly shook the ground, making Sofia stumble backward a step. The Realitants looked around in confusion, Mothball in particular. Sofia looked up at the black mountain. It shook as well; in the distance, she heard the sounds of breaking glass and twisting metal.

"Need be keepin' our focus!" Mothball shouted. "Master Tick must be goin' about 'is business. On the count of three—we charge! *One!*"

Sofia nudged Paul in the arm with her elbow. "For Tick and Sato," she said, not caring if her voice betrayed how scared she felt.

"Two!"

Paul nodded without breaking his focused stare. "For Tick and Sato."

"Three!"

Sofia sprinted forward before anyone else, her body acting before her mind could talk her out of it. Pumping her fist in the air, she screamed out one word, louder than she'd ever shouted anything in her life, almost ripping her throat raw.

"REEEEAAAALITAAAAANTS!"

The thunder of footsteps and echoing calls of her rallying cry sounded from behind her.

Sofia ran straight for the closing pack of metaspides.

The world shook.

Tick felt as if his mind was detached from his body. He rotated in a circle, staring at the huge open chamber he'd run into. He saw a vast open space with an artificial sky above him, complete with stars and a moon. Half-completed machines and menacing structures covered the hundreds of square yards of floor space. Workers hung on for dear life as scaffolding fell apart beneath them. Large holograms of floor plans and complicated designs hung

throughout the chamber like see-through kites, countless lifts constantly moving between them, hovering and flying as if by magic.

Tick saw it all, but still felt his mind slipping away from him, out of control, on the edge of insanity. He staggered back and forth, the ground shaking and cracking.

To his right stood a huge tower made of gold that rose at least ten stories into the air. Near the top, partially obscured by a metal-grid catwalk, two words were stamped into the shiny metal.

Dark Infinity.

At the bottom of the tower, a panel of gold slid to the side, revealing a bright interior. A man appeared, then ran straight for Tick.

Don't come near me, Tick thought. Stay away!

But then he saw it was Chu, and the anger and fear that had subsided flared anew.

“How!” Chu screamed, still running for Tick. “How could you possibly have done this?”

His words were distant, as if spoken through a wall. Splitting pain hammered in Tick’s skull. He squeezed his hands into fists to stop them from trembling. Pressure mounted in his chest and it became difficult to breathe. He could feel heat scorching him from the inside out.

He felt that strange separation from his body. He knew he was losing control, completely—but he couldn’t do anything to stop it. The chamber shook, the tremors increasing in magnitude. He stared at Chu and Dark Infinity and from the corner of his eye he saw things falling. Metallic crashes filled the air.

Chu stopped, his eyes darting around the complex. “How . . . what . . . stop this! Stop this right now!”

Tick could barely hear him. As if reaching through a bucket of mud, he grasped for and found a tiny glimmer of sanity in his mind. He’d been sent here for a purpose—to destroy Chu’s plague. He held on to that one thought, forced his hand to steady, and reached inside the leather satchel at his side for the silvery cylinder that held the antidote to Dark Infinity. All he found was something hard and jagged, dusty and rough. Confused, he pulled it out and held it up to his eyes, squinting to see it through the blur of the chaos swimming around him.

It was a big rock. Frantic, he dug in the satchel again. Nothing. The bag was empty.

The antidote was gone.

Sofia did as she’d been instructed and threw a Rager toward the army of

metaspides, never stopping her sprint. The little ball hit the ground and spun forward, ripping along with increasing speed as the static electricity erupted from it, gathering massive amounts of grass and dirt and rock. The weapon quickly grew into an earth-made bomb, a gigantic bowling ball of nature ready to destroy something. Sofia watched with elation as it crashed into the front line of the spidery robots and smashed a dozen of them into metallic shards.

To her left and right, other Ragers hit the metaspides, wiping out the first wave of their enemy. As soon as the dust settled, Sofia started firing her Shurric, pushing the trigger repeatedly as she swept the nozzle back and forth, pointing it at anything shiny and silver. With each shot, a muted clap of thunder shook the air, rolling forward in an invisible tidal wave until it slammed into its target. Metaspides flew through the air as if ropes yanked them backward, dozens of them catapulting toward the black mountain as more and more shots thumped from the Realitants.

Sofia kept running, reaching into her bag and grabbing another Rager. She spotted a thick cluster of robots and threw it in that direction, then ran after it. As soon as the massive ball of dirt and rock smashed another line of metaspides, she went in, firing.

She was almost starting to have fun.

Despite the whole world shaking around them, Chu laughed—a bitter, empty chortle. The man reached into his pocket and pulled out the silvery cylinder containing the antidote. He held it up above his head.

“Looking for this?” he shouted. “How many times are you people going to mistake me for an idiot?”

Tick ignored him, focusing his eyes on the shiny object, his heart sinking. If only he—

The antidote suddenly shot out of Chu’s hand and flew through the air, turning end over end before it slammed into Tick’s palm and stuck there, even before he closed his fingers around it. His breath caught in his throat as he stared at his hand in disbelief.

Chu couldn’t hide the shock on his face, his eyes wide, his lower lip quivering. “How is this possible?” he whispered, too low to hear but his lips making the words obvious to Tick. The man’s eyes shifted from the antidote to Tick’s face.

“Listen to me!” Chu yelled, holding his hands palm out as if approaching someone about to jump from a bridge. “You don’t understand! Dark Infinity is a giant Barrier Wand. It’s powerful enough to control and shape the Realities. It’s the greatest achievement in history! All I need is your help—and we can

use it for good. You have to trust me. Give me a chance. Stop this madness!”

Tick stumbled about as the earthquake got worse, things crashing everywhere, the massive golden cylinder of Dark Infinity pitching dangerously from side to side. The black specks returned, swimming in front of Tick’s eyes, but this time mixed with flashing colors, blinding lights. He felt as if his heart was a furnace, burning him from within.

“Atticus!” A female voice, barely audible, came from his right. “Atticus, you have to stop! You don’t understand what you’re doing!”

Jane. It was Mistress Jane. But he couldn’t see her. The chamber shook and spun.

Tick screamed and threw the silver antidote in the general direction of Dark Infinity, the cylinder blurry and bouncing in his vision. He heard an ear-splitting crack, then the bubbling sound of sizzling acid eating at metal. His vision darkened until he could barely see. He fell to his knees, screaming, and grabbed his head with both hands, squeezing his eyes shut.

Then, though he would have thought it impossible, everything got worse. The pain, the sounds, the shaking, the spinning, the flashing lights. Tick didn’t think he could survive another second.

A booming crack rocked the air, and his eyes snapped open. His vision cleared in time to see that Dark Infinity had exploded into countless tiny golden pieces, flying and swirling through the air like snowflakes in a blizzard. A sparkling tornado. It sounded like millions of killer bees swarming.

“Atticus!” Jane yelled again, somewhere closer to him. “You have to stop!”

Tick knew he wasn’t thinking straight. His mind was a chaotic soup of jumbled memories and thoughts. He glanced to his right and saw Jane running for him; Chu had disappeared. A small part of his brain knew she was coming to help him, but all his eyes saw at that moment was the woman who had tried to kill him, to choke him to death in the hallway. The horrendous fear and rage he’d felt when he’d been so close to death returned full force.

He didn’t know exactly what he did, but he knew he couldn’t stop it. The swarming specks of metal that had been Dark Infinity flew at Mistress Jane, like flies descending on a feast, surrounding her in a blur of sparkling gold. The metallic tornado consumed her body, obscuring her from sight.

Somewhere deep inside of him, Tick knew he’d just done something terrible.

I didn’t mean to, he thought. I didn’t mean to!

In answer, Jane’s screams erupted through the air.

The Drag Race

Paul threw a Rager at the only remaining metaspide close to him, watching with glee as it steamrolled into a massive ball of earth and wiped the machine out, sparks flying as pieces of crumpled metal flew in all directions.

“Yeah, ba—”

A hard claw grabbed his ankle from behind and lifted, slamming his body to the ground. Paul tried to scream but there was no breath left in his body. He looked up to see a metaspide staring down at him with glowing robotic eyes. He wanted to say something—spit, yell for help—but he could only open and close his mouth, fighting to get air back in his lungs.

Scissoring metal blades came out of a hidden compartment, snipping on its hinges as it moved toward Paul’s face. But then the spider paused; its body rotated upward, as if it had spotted something behind them. Paul heard the glorious shouts of Mothball charging in to save him, when the metaspide took off on its spindly legs in the other direction, dragging Paul with it.

Paul’s body finally let him suck in a huge gulp of fresh air. It was enough for him to shriek with pain as rocks and dirt scraped his back, ripping his clothes. He kicked with his free foot, tried to slow the metaspide down by clawing at the ground, but to no avail. A burst of pain exploded inside him when his casted arm smacked a stray piece of one of the creature’s destroyed buddies.

“Mothball!” he shouted, trying without success to turn his head back to see if she was close. He kicked at the metaspide’s body and legs, but it kept running, dragging him like a sack of trash.

Enough of this ruddy nonsense, Mothball thought as she ran after Paul.

She lifted her Shurric, aiming more carefully than she’d ever done in her fighting life.

“Keep your legs down!” she shouted, still running, still aiming.

She pulled the trigger.

Paul came to a sudden stop, watching in disbelief as the body of the metaspide catapulted away from him and landed fifty feet away with a mechanical spurt of buzzes and sparks.

The thing’s claw was still attached to Paul’s ankle, the arm of it ending in a

shredded clump of coppery wires. Paul reached down and easily separated the clawed metal fingers, then threw it far as he could.

Mothball ran up, towering over him as she sucked in gasps of air. “Ain’t the first time I saved your life,” she said.

Paul stood, wincing at the stings on his back from the cuts and scrapes. He didn’t want to think about what his skin must look like. “You used your *Shurric!*”

“That I did,” Mothball replied, calmly.

“You could’ve smashed me, too, ya know.”

“Reckon you’re right.”

“Or the spider could’ve ripped my leg off when it went bye-bye.”

“Reckon you’re right.”

Paul shook his head. “Well, thanks for saving me.”

He scanned the dusty area around them. Not a single working metaspide was in sight, and he heard the muted thump of a *Shurric* in the distance and a couple of *Ragers* wreaking their havoc somewhere.

It’s almost over, he thought. We wiped them clean out!

The ground shook worse than before, swiping away his extremely brief elation.

“Need to gather the others, we do,” Mothball said. “Meet me at the entrance to Chu’s mountain.” She took off running without waiting for a reply.

Paul thought of Sofia. He turned in a circle, searching for her.

He ran in a stumble toward the dark shape of the mountain, the haze making it look even more sinister than before. The quaking ground was making him sick. He shouted Sofia’s name, mad at himself for getting separated. As the dust settled, he finally caught a glimpse of her near the huge glass doors marking the entrance to Chu’s palace. From the looks of it, the doors had been mostly obliterated by a full *Rager*, jagged shards of glass littering the ground.

“Sofia!” he shouted again, running toward her.

She spotted him and stared for a long moment, then turned her back to him. The earthquake made it appear as if she were jumping up and down.

“Sofia!” he called, but she ignored him, her attention focused on the gaping hole leading to Chu’s palace.

What is she doing?

Without so much as a glance back at him, Sofia sprinted for the destroyed glass doors, disappearing into the darkness beyond.

What . . .

“Follow her!” he heard Mothball roar from a distance. “Everyone! We

gotta get to Tick!”

Paul ran forward, but only made it two steps when the earthquake doubled in intensity, knocking him to the ground. He looked up just in time to see a huge section of the mountainous building crack and fall, exploding when it hit the ground, the sound of its crash splintering through the air.

“No!” he shouted.

The entrance was completely blocked off.

Pacini

Sofia ran, her Shurric at the ready for anything that jumped out at her.

The building shook horribly around her; she heard a crash of breaking glass far behind. Around her, the walls and floor bent and rippled; chunks fell from the ceiling. Every step took her full concentration and balance to make sure she didn't fall down.

Tick is doing this, she thought. I don't know how or why, but Tick is doing this.

She pictured in her mind the map Master George had shown them—third lower level, section eight. Her legs already exhausted, she somehow kept going, winding her way through hall after hall, down staircases, through more halls. With every turn, she saw people running, heading in the opposite direction, fleeing the destruction.

She kept going forward.

Tick was lost.

The blackness killing his vision was complete now, which only escalated the sheer panic that surged through him, competing with the intense heat that still burned. He stumbled about, waving his arms, calling for help. Jane's screams still rocked the air, though they'd grown deeper, guttural, filled with gurgles and raw shrieks.

What did I do? he thought. *What did I do to her?*

And where had Chu gone?

All around him, the sounds of destruction penetrated the darkness of his sight, scaring him. Huge *things* crashed nearby; it was a wonder he hadn't been crushed yet by a falling object. He wanted to shrink to the ground and curl into a ball until it was all over. But he couldn't. He had to run. He had to get away.

He kept stumbling forward, searching for something, someone, anything.

When Sofia saw the big metal doors, she knew she'd arrived. Without pausing, she threw a Rager forward, then readied her Shurric. The Rager pulled the metal and plastic from the floor and ceiling as it rolled along, growing bigger and bigger. It crashed into the doors, bending them with a metallic squeal, but not breaking them open. Sofia fired repeatedly with the

Shurric, its invisible thumps of sonic energy enough to finish the job. The doors parted to let her through.

She scrambled into a chamber as big as a football stadium, chaos reigning as things crashed and burned all around her. Most of the people had already fled, but she heard the skin-crawling screams of a woman in the distance.

“Tick!” Sofia shouted, getting no answer.

She ran forward, scanning her eyes left and right. *Tick—where are you?*

“Tick!” she yelled when she spotted him, sprinting toward her friend.

He looked terrible, sweaty and cut up, wandering around like a drunk man, feeling at the air with shaking hands, staring with blank eyes. His mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out. Every step he took sent a ripple surging through the floor away from him, like a stone dropped in water. Chunks of the ceiling fell and were whipped away just before crushing his body, as if a host of guardian angels hovered above him, protecting him.

“Tick!” she yelled again, but he didn’t respond. He looked so awful, so . . . crazy, she could hardly believe it was the same boy she knew.

Sofia kept running, looking above to dodge falling objects, winding her way back and forth toward Tick. A few remaining workers pushed past her in the opposite direction, fleeing. A thick man with a spotty beard crashed into her, knocking her to the ground. Sofia screamed something rude in Italian as she scrambled to get back up.

She caught a flash out of the corner of her eye, looking up just in time to see a spinning rod of metal right before it slammed into her shoulder. She fell again, and a boxy contraption plummeted from the sky, landed on its corner, then fell over to pin her legs to the floor. She pushed at the smashed box with both hands, but couldn’t move it off her feet.

The sounds of destruction intensified—crashing, banging, exploding, breaking. Objects of all sizes fell from the false sky like the world’s worst hailstorm, smashing to pieces all around her. The volume of noise pierced her ears, threatening to break her ear drums.

Sofia saw the long rod of metal that had smacked her shoulder nearby. She squirmed awkwardly until she could reach it; she grabbed it, pulled it close. The rod was twisted and curved like a crowbar. Wedging one end under the clunky, destroyed box that used to be part of who-knew-what awful invention of Chu’s empire, she pushed on the other end of the lever with both arms, gathering every ounce of strength left inside her. At first nothing moved, but she let out a scream of effort, throwing every part of her into getting that stupid thing off—

The metal box toppled over with a sound lost in the symphony of destruction filling the gigantic chamber.

Sofia got to her feet, ignoring the throbs of pain lancing through her legs.

Half-limping, half-running, she went after Tick. He was so close, still spinning in circles, stumbling, shouting things Sofia didn't understand. He looked like a man who'd lost his mind. Falling objects from the ceiling were deflected at the last minute as though a shield protected him from harm. Sofia ran on, zigzagging and stumbling herself.

She reached Tick, tackling him to the ground. "Tick, what's wrong with you?"

"It burns!" he screamed. "Someone help me! I can't control it! Someone *help me!*"

Sofia didn't think he even knew she was there. She fumbled in her pocket, panic making her hands shake. She felt around, grasped the silver pen, pulled it out.

"My brain is splitting!" Tick screamed, thrashing around, hitting her.

Sofia didn't know exactly what the pen would do to him, or if it would hurt, or how long it would affect him. She didn't know anything for sure. But she had to do it.

"Tick, I'm sorry," she whispered.

She jabbed the end of the pen into Tick's neck and pushed the button. A quick hiss sounded as Tick's head jerked and hit the floor. His body went limp.

Everything went still—the shaking, the crashing, the ripping, the bending. Everything stopped.

The only sound was a woman still screaming in the distance.

Out of the Rubble

Paul grunted as he moved another chunk of black glass off the pile.

“Isn’t there another way in?” he asked.

“Ain’t nary a one that ain’t blocked!” Sally shouted, lifting a piece the size of a large suitcase. He threw it and Paul watched it split into several pieces upon landing.

Then Paul noticed the silence.

“Hey . . . *hey!*” he shouted.

Everyone else quit working, looking about.

“It’s ruddy well stopped, it ’as,” Mothball said, a crooked-toothed grin breaking across her face.

Paul ran away from the pile, craning his neck to look up at the mountain as he got farther away. Though full of cracks and missing pieces, the building wasn’t shaking or falling apart anymore. The ground wasn’t trembling. The air had grown still and silent, the dust already settling to the ground.

“Sofia did it,” Mothball said, waving Paul back over to help. “Come on, gotta clear this pile. Gotta find ’er and Master Tick.”

Encouraged for the first time in awhile, Paul sprinted back and started sorting through the rubble with renewed vigor, knowing his hurt arm would be some kind of sore tomorrow. Piece after piece, chunk after chunk, the Realitants worked together until a shaft of light escaped from within. They’d found a way through.

“We did it!” Paul shouted, grabbing more pieces. Soon they had a hole big enough for them to enter the damaged building.

Mothball went first, then Sally, then Paul and the other Realitants. They regrouped inside, sweeping their weapons back and forth in case of an attack. There wasn’t a sign of anyone or anything dangerous, only dust and debris.

“Come on, let’s—” Paul started to say, then stopped when he saw movement up ahead in the hallway. He couldn’t make it out at first—it looked like an injured animal crawling along, slide-and-stop, slide-and-stop.

But then the dust settled and the figures came into the light. Everything became clear.

It was Sofia, her back to them, dragging Tick’s battered body down the broken hallway.

Somehow, Jane finally quit screaming.

She lay on the floor, her mind trying to shut down in order to avoid the sheer agony of her pain. It filled every inch of her, every organ, every cell, every molecule. Her nerves bristled with it. The slightest movement of her ragged breathing sent fresh pinpricks shooting across her skin, *through* her skin, into her blood and muscles and bone. She hurt, she ached, she stung. The pain consumed her. The only thing that kept her from weeping was the promise of even more pain.

I tried to help him, she thought. I was only trying to help him. How? How could he have done this to me?

Her eyes had been closed for a long time, the prospect of seeing the damage to her body too horrific. But finally, she allowed her eyelids to slide up. The movement sent a new wave of agony across her face and through her head, as if needles had pierced her skull. But she kept her eyes open.

She did not, however, have the courage to move anything else. She saw only what she could from her current position, crumpled like a rag doll. But it was enough to let her know her life was over.

Shards of gold, small but jagged, covered every inch of her body, jutting from the skin at all kinds of angles. Blood was everywhere, seeping from the wounds. Her body was like a sea of red, a million tiny golden icebergs breaking the surface. Most of the shards appeared to be *fused* to her skin, impossible to remove. She could only imagine what her face must look like. A beast. A hideous beast.

A bit of the old Jane returned to her then. The one who'd been courageous and strong, unwilling to break under any task or trial. The one who'd fought on, no matter what.

Realities help me, I can do this. I will do this.

Bracing herself, Jane counted silently to three, readying her mind and soul for what she was about to do. Then, as quickly and as efficiently as she could, she pushed her arms below her and stood up.

The blood-curdling scream that erupted from her was inhuman—the terrified shriek of tortured demons. The sound tore through the air, filled the world around her, pierced her own ears until they bled. It seemed impossible that she didn't faint from the pain that had ruptured inside of her like the detonation of a nuclear bomb.

She stood still, enduring. Eventually, the pain lessened. Barely, but enough so that she had the awkward sensation of bliss, a warm calm.

All things are relative, she thought.

Then, a very strange thing occurred to her. She didn't understand it, didn't know how the thought formed in her mind or where it came from. Perhaps it had been something Reginald had said in the moments before he ran away, something he'd told the boy about Dark Infinity. No matter—she'd figure it

out later. But regardless of *how* she knew, she *did* know.

She had changed forever. In the midst of all the horror, perhaps there was a silver lining after all. Yes, she knew. She *knew*.

Mistress Jane had no Barrier Wand within her reach. No one in her Reality had a Wand to pull her away from this place. No one, anywhere, had a lock on her nanolocator besides those who could do nothing about it. Yet, despite all that, Jane winked herself away, away from the Fourth Reality and back to the Thirteenth.

She did it by *thinking* it.

Yes, she had changed forever.

An Unfortunate Meeting

Tick looked dead.

He lay flat on his back, his head cradled in Sofia's lap as every last Realitant stood in a group around them, staring down solemnly as if it were a funeral. Tick's face was pale, scratches and welts marring almost every inch of him. His clothes were ripped, bloodied, even melted in some places, attached to the skin. But he was breathing, marked by the slight rise and fall of his chest.

Man, Paul thought. When that dude wakes up, he's gonna hurt something awful.

They were gathered in an open grassy area of the ruined park, ignoring the hundreds of people who had evacuated Chu's mountain building. Most of them stood in silent huddles, staring back at the black structure, probably in shock at how close they'd come to dying.

"Gonna be just fine, he will," Mothball announced, kneeling next to Tick. "Sofia 'ere may ruddy well win a medal from the old man for this."

The crowd of Realitants broke into applause as Sally bellowed a long-winded cheer that echoed across the park but made absolutely no sense. Paul thought he caught the words "rabbit" and "coon dog." Sofia showed no reaction to anything, staring at a blank spot in front of her.

Mothball reached across Tick and grabbed him around the torso, lifting him up with a heavy grunt. His body flopped over her shoulder with no sign of life, his arms and legs dangling.

"Come on," she said. "Chi'karda spot's only a 'undred yards up yonder." She nodded her head in the direction away from the destruction.

As the others started following Mothball, Paul reached down and offered Sofia a hand. "Let's go, Miss Italy. Tick's gonna be fine, thanks to you. You can beg me for forgiveness later."

Sofia took his hand and pulled herself to her feet. "Forgiveness for what? Killing more spiders than you did?"

"No. For not telling me you had a super-secret mission to put Tick in a coma."

"Oh. Yeah. Sorry that Master George thinks I'm better than you."

Paul sighed. "You're forgiven."

A shout from behind turned both their heads. A dark-haired man, his clothes ripped to shreds, his body battered and bloody, was limping along as fast as he could, yelling something unintelligible. Sofia recognized him before

Paul did.

“It’s Chu!” she yelled. “Mothball! That’s Reginald Chu!”

Mothball turned and ran back toward them, Tick still slung over her shoulder. “Right, you are. Reginald Chu! Sally! Grab the monster!”

Sally had barely taken a step before an even louder shout came from a cluster of trees to their right. *Another* dark-haired man bolted from the shadows, his fist raised in the air, screaming obscenities that made Paul wince. Then, in disbelief, he saw who it was. Paul looked back at the other man.

Two Reginald Chus were running straight for them.

“Whoa,” he whispered.

“Oh, no,” Mothball said, standing right next to Paul. “Oh, no!” she said louder. Then she screamed at the top of her lungs. “Run! Everyone *run!*”

Without waiting for a response, the tall lady sprinted for their Chi’karda launching point, Tick bouncing up and down on her shoulder, the other Realitants right behind her.

It took Paul a second to break his stare from the impossible sight of two identical men coming toward them—one limping, the other moving at full speed. Both seemed oblivious of the other, each wanting to reach the Realitants and unaware of his twin.

“Come on!” Sofia yelled, grabbing Paul by the arm and pulling him as they ran after Mothball. “I think I know—”

An ear-piercing noise cut her off just as a surge of blinding light flashed behind them. A terribly loud boom rattled the air, the sound of a million amplified horns going off at once. Paul had *heard* that sound before.

He’d barely had the thought when a rush of tornado-force wind hit them, knocking him and Sofia flat on the ground. The wind passed over them, a solid wave of air that was almost visible as it tore at trees and bushes and benches, traveling outward in a wide arc. It knocked over the other fleeing Realitants and kept moving along its destructive path.

All was still for a single moment. Then the ground started violently shaking, far worse than before. Trees crashed to the ground. Sounds of breaking glass and bending metal filled the air as the mountainous palace of Chu started collapsing all over again.

“Tick!” Paul yelled over the deafening noise. “He must’ve woke up!”

“No!” Sofia shouted back. “I think it has something to do with Chu meeting his Alterant.”

Paul risked a glance over his shoulder and saw that only one Chu remained—the injured one. He limped toward them, struggling all the worse because of the earthquake.

Sally suddenly bolted past Paul and Sofia, running for the man. Like picking up a bag of sticks, Sally grabbed Chu and flopped him over his shoulder just like Mothball had done with Tick. He ran back toward them, stumbling left and right as the ground shook.

“Get up! Get up!” Sofia shouted, pulling on Paul’s good arm.

He obeyed and ran after her, his mind twisting in a million different directions.

The earthquake worsened, throwing Sofia to the ground. Paul helped her up and they kept running, losing one step for every two they made forward. Sally caught up with them, moving as if Chu weighed only ten pounds.

Eventually, the Realitants gathered in the designated spot, every last one of them staring back toward Chu Industries in awe and fear. Mothball still held Tick, and she was shouting something over and over.

“Wink us out, George! Wink us out! Ruddy wink us out!”

Sounds of splitting and cracking and shattering glass rocked the air. A thunderous roar ripped across the ground, and Paul felt his heart wedge itself in his throat.

Chu’s palace collapsed toward the ground, the whole thing at once. Paul threw his hands over his ears. The sounds of destruction were louder than anything he’d ever heard before as an entire building of metal and glass exploded nearby. He watched as a massive cloud of black dust rolled out of the falling ruins, billowing out and rushing toward them at an alarming speed.

“Now, Master George!” Mothball roared, barely audible over the sounds of the mountain collapsing. “*Now!*”

Like a fleet of starships zipping into hyperspace, the Realitants winked away in quick succession. Paul actually *tasted* the choking dust and saw the suffocating darkness before he felt the familiar tingle and was winked to safety.

Much to Discuss

No one did any celebrating.

After getting safely back to headquarters and undergoing full debriefings, most of the Realitants said their good-byes and winked back to their home Realities. Paul and Sofia stuck to Tick's side; except for the rise and fall of his chest, he seemed as dead as a corpse. Paul couldn't think of much to say as they followed Mothball to the infirmary, where Doctor Hillenstat hooked Tick up to several monitoring machines; an IV dripped a clear liquid into his veins. Rutger watched from the side, scrutinizing the doctor's every move as if waiting for him to make a mistake.

"How long will he be out?" Sofia asked. "Is he gonna be okay?"

Hillenstat frowned. "An hour. A day. A week. No telling."

"But will he be *okay*?" Paul said.

The doctor felt Tick's forehead. "Yes, he's fine for now. But in the long run?" He shrugged. "I think I'll let Master George be the judge of that."

Sofia huffed. "Aren't doctors supposed to make you feel better?"

Hillenstat smiled through his droopy mustache, the first time Paul had ever seen him do it. "Doctors are supposed to be honest. Now, I'll go and get Master George and you can bother *him* with your questions. I need a nap."

He wiped his hands together as if swiping away crumbs from dinner, gave one last look at Tick, then walked out of the infirmary.

Sofia looked at Rutger. "Nice guy you got there. I'm glad I'm not sick."

Rutger ignored them, looking over at a machine that monitored Tick's vitals, but Mothball spoke up. "Best doc in the Realities, he is. A bit snippy, though."

Master George walked in, Sally lumbering along behind him. They both pulled up chairs to the bed and sat down so the whole group was in a circle, looking solemnly at the comatose Tick.

"So what's the deal?" Paul asked.

"Yeah, what's wrong with him?" Sofia added.

Master George cleared his throat, not breaking his gaze from Tick's face. "Yes, yes, a very good question, my young friends. I certainly didn't expect things to go in this direction with the lad. Troubling, I tell you. Very troubling indeed."

He paused, and after a few moments of tense silence, Sofia threw her hands into the air, palms up. "Well?"

“Show some respect,” Rutger growled.

“No, no,” Master George said, throwing a quick glance in Rutger’s direction. “We’ve seen a lot this past day, and answers are deserved. If everyone would give me a moment, I’ll do my best to tell you what we know.”

He took a deep breath, then began. “First of all, Sato is recovering nicely. The lunacy left him as soon as the trouble started with Tick in the Fourth—the antidote obviously found its target during all that chaos. But Sato’s very battered and bruised from the abuse he gave himself while under the control of Dark Infinity. I’d encourage you all to visit him. He’s back in his normal quarters—quite a relief, actually. It was very hard to see him locked up like that.”

Master George pointed at Tick. “As for our young sleeping lad, here . . . goodness gracious me, what a turn of events. I believe I may have found a connection that explains what is happening.”

Paul noticed everyone in the room leaned forward just a little, himself included.

“Entropy,” Master George announced, looking around to see the reaction.

Paul squinted his eyes as if that would make his brain work better. “You used that word in the weird spinner movie you sent us.”

“Quite right. It refers to the rule of nature that all things move toward eventual destruction. Entropy *accelerates* when a branched Reality begins fragmenting. The nuclear force holding matter together weakens, and things begin to break apart and dissolve—but at a pace millions of times faster than nature’s course. A fragmented Reality can be gone—completely gone—in a matter of weeks or months.”

“What does that have to do with Tick?” Paul asked.

The skin around Master George’s eyes seemed to melt, sinking into a worried frown. “I fear that Master Atticus has no control whatsoever of the inexplicable amounts of Chi’karda stored within him. Where it comes from, and why it’s there, I’ve yet to determine. But I do know what it’s doing. It’s unleashing itself on objects that frighten or threaten Tick. And when it does . . .”

He paused, as if expecting someone to call him crazy if he continued. “Well, it’s *fragmenting* them. Tick is doing, on a very small scale, exactly what happens to a fragmented Reality. He’s a catalyst—triggering a heightened state of entropy that dissolves the matter around him. But because it’s so out of control, the matter slams back together, the quantum forces regaining their strength and forming the monstrosities you’ve seen along your latest journeys.”

“Whoa,” Paul whispered.

Sofia tried to sort it out. “So basically, if Tick freaks out, he can destroy and reform things, trapping whatever gets in his path.”

Master George nodded. “Yes, and depending on how far along the entropy develops—how much matter is destroyed before it reforms—the objects may retain some of their old qualities and characteristics.”

“We thought it was something Chu had done,” Sofia said. “The trees by Tick’s house, the spiders, the glass tunnel exploding and melting—all of it. We thought it was all part of the test.”

Paul looked down at Tick’s sleeping face. “Remind me not to make him mad.”

Master George sighed. “I’m afraid Tick’s life will have to move in a new direction. He’ll have to stay at home, be monitored, watched over. We’ll need an extraordinary amount of help from his parents—and we’ll have to find ways of ensuring he doesn’t have another . . . episode. At least until we sort things out.”

“What about us?” Paul asked. “We can help. We can stay with him.”

Master George shook his head. “No, no, Master Paul. I need you and Sofia to return to your homes right away and pick up on the rest of the school year. With Dark Infinity destroyed, I believe things will be quiet for awhile, and I need both of you to live your normal lives for a bit.”

Paul felt his stomach squeeze into a knot. Nothing, absolutely nothing, sounded worse than going back home and living a “normal” life.

“But,” he said, searching for arguments, “we’re Realitants. Why do we—”

Master George held up a hand. “All in its appointed time, lad. For now, you must go to school, learn, experience growing up. I promise it won’t be long before we wink you in for further training or to help with whatever obstacle presents itself to deter our mission.”

“What happened to Mistress Jane?” Rutger asked.

Master George looked at him sharply, then glanced away as if trying to hide his alarm at the question. “That, I don’t know. We can only hope she’s . . .” He didn’t need to finish.

“Maybe when Sato’s well enough—” Rutger began, but was cut off by Mothball.

“Pipe it for now, little man. One worry at a time.”

Master George stood up. “Paul and Sofia, I need the two of you to prepare to return home. I’ll send several specially prepared science books with you so that you can study beyond those things you’ll learn in normal schooling. I need a little more time with Tick, and I need him to help me resolve the matter of”—he pointed a thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the holding cell—“our captive, Reginald Chu. Tick may be the only one who’ll be able to tell *which* Chu it is.”

Paul stood as well, trying to ignore the hurt growing inside him. He really didn't want to say good-bye to everyone. "Yeah, what's the deal with the Chu thing? What happened back there?"

Master George stared at him, his face serious. "Two Alterants *met*, lad, face to face. Such a thing is a disaster—a complete disaster, always."

"Why? What happens?" Paul asked.

"One survives, while the other is thrown into . . ." Master George looked about nervously. "Well, we don't know for sure. But Reginald himself always called it the Nonex, and it's something I hope to never encounter. Whenever Alterants meet like that, it causes a terrible disturbance in Chi'karda and the Realities. I wouldn't be surprised if an entirely *new* Reality, perhaps even solid enough to be a main branch, was formed from this. Dreadful, really."

Paul rubbed his eyes and temples. "My head hurts."

"Yes, yes, off you go," Master George said, shooing them away from Tick. "It's time for you to go home. Rutger, please fetch my Barrier Wand."

Awakening

Tick didn't know how much time passed between the instant he grew aware of himself and the moment he opened his eyes. An hour maybe. Possibly two.

It was the pain that kept him hiding in his own darkness. Terrible, terrible pain, right in the middle of his skull, as if he'd spent the last week lending his head out as a neighborhood speed bump.

But he finally slid his eyelids open, scared the light would only make it worse but having no choice.

Master George sat in a chair to his left, leaning over him with a huge smile on his ruddy, puffy face. Sato sat to Tick's right, his face swollen but somehow cheerful—for him, anyway.

Tick started to get up, but only made it an inch before thumps of pain slammed his brain like hard fists.

"Now, now, Tick," Master George said, placing a hand on Tick's arm. "Let's not be hasty. You've been through quite an ordeal."

Tick had squeezed his eyes shut again, but forced them open. "What . . . what happened? Chu was there . . . and Mistress Jane . . . and a huge Barrier Wand—"

Master George patted his arm. "Yes, yes, we know much of what happened, thanks to Sofia. Though I'm quite anxious to debrief you about what happened from the time you left your two friends to the time Sofia knocked you senseless. Quite anxious indeed."

"Tick," Sato said, almost a whisper.

Tick tilted his head to the right, raised his eyebrows. "Yeah?"

"You've made me very unhappy. As soon as you're better, I'm going to punch you in the ear."

"Huh?"

Tick could only remember Sato smiling once during the few times they'd been together, but something close to a grin broke across the boy's face.

"Twice, now, you have saved me," Sato said. "You're making me look bad."

"I saved you?" Tick asked, then looked at Master George. "The antidote hit the thing? It worked? Last I remember, the whole place was about to fall down."

"Atticus," Master George said. "You're in no condition right now to learn the things you need to about what happened in Chu's black mountain. Just

know that you're safe and Dark Infinity is destroyed, as are the nanoplague bugs it was controlling. Though things did get a bit hairy, it's all worked out in the end."

"Well, what about—"

Master George shushed him, then held up a thick, messy binder stuffed with papers, some folded, others ripped. "It's all been documented here for you to read while you recover. I'll also be sending you home with a big stack of Realitant textbooks and manuals. Now that you're a Realitant First Class, you can begin further study."

"First Class?"

"That's right, old chap." Master George held out a card, similar to the one Tick had been given in May, but dark red this time. Tick saw the words printed on it:

Atticus Higginbottom

Realitant First Class

"I've already sent Rutger and Mothball ahead to have a very long discussion with your parents," Master George said after he placed the card in Tick's left hand. "I'm afraid you'll need to be schooled at home now, and watched very closely—"

"What?" Tick tried to sit up again, but this time Sato pushed him back, gently. Pain throbbled through Tick's head.

Master George continued speaking. "No need to worry, good man, no need to worry. As you're well aware, you have an uncanny link to Chi'karda, and it appears capable of spinning completely out of control. But we'll all keep a close eye on you, and if anything troubling happens again, we'll wink you straight in and take care of it. It'll be quite simple, really, considering you'll have plenty of Chi'karda surrounding you wherever you go."

Tick groaned, so confused at the swirl of emotions inside him he didn't know if he felt sad, angry, hopeless, or happy. But suddenly, all he wanted in the world was to go home and see his family.

"Just wink me back," he said. "Please. We can figure it out later. Just send me home."

"An extraordinary idea, Master Tick! Exactly what I had in mind. Paul and Sofia have long since gone, and it's your turn. Don't worry"—Tick's mouth had opened at the mention of his friends—"they said they'd have e-mails waiting for you by the time you arrived in Deer Park. Muffintops, Sato, and I will miss you greatly, but I'm sure our next reunion will happen very soon."

Tick nodded, the pain in his head making him feel nauseated. "Where's your Barrier Wand? Can you wink me from here?"

Master George bit his lip. "Well . . . yes, yes, we can, but I need you to do one thing for me first."

“What?”

Master George looked across the bed. “Sato?”

Sato stood and walked out of the room, slightly limping. His arms were severely bruised, especially around his wrists.

A long minute passed. Muffintops wandered into the room and jumped up onto Tick’s chest, purring as she settled into a comfy position, staring at him with her glowing eyes.

“You be good, cat,” Tick said, wincing at how stupid it sounded. “Take care of the old man.”

A sound at the door took Tick’s attention away. Sato had returned and right behind him, looking even more disheveled and bruised than Sato or Tick, was Reginald Chu.

Tick sucked in a gasp of air, bolted into a sitting position, and squirmed backward until he hit the wall. Muffintops shrieked and jumped to the floor; Master George stood, trying to grab Tick’s arm.

“Calm yourself!” the old man said. “Master Atticus, calm yourself!”

Tick ignored the pain that exploded inside him. He noticed handcuffs on Chu’s wrists, but that meant nothing. Nothing! The man had more tricks up his sleeve than—

“Tick.” Chu said it, softly, calmly.

Tick ignored him, glaring back and forth between Master George and Sato. “How could you just let him walk around here?”

“Tick,” Chu repeated. “Please. *Please*, look at me.”

Finally, still breathing heavily, Tick did. An inexplicable warmth spread through him, and then a realization hit him. “What did you call me?” he whispered.

“Tick,” Chu said, acting as if he hadn’t heard. “Please tell these people who I am. I don’t know anything about what’s going on, or this other Reginald Chu they keep talking about. It’s me, Tick—please, tell them!”

Thoughts churned inside Tick’s mind. He remembered back in the woods by his house when Mr. Chu had appeared, looking haggard and desperate, acting like he wanted to help them. Something had seemed wrong then, something had been off. And now Tick knew what it was.

“That’s my science teacher,” he finally said, feeling so calm it seemed the pain had been cut in half. “That’s Mr. Chu, not . . . Reginald Chu. Or . . . you know who I mean. This isn’t the bad guy.”

Master George gave a knowing look to Sato, the slightest hint of a smile creasing his face. “I suspected as much, but wanted to be certain. Sorry to spring it on you like that, but I didn’t want any chance of you having preconceptions.”

“How do you know for sure?” Sato asked.

“Because he called me Tick. The evil Chu, back in Deer Park, kept calling me Atticus. My science teacher has called me Tick since the first day I met him. Never once has he called me Atticus. I can’t believe I didn’t think about that back then.”

“No matter,” Master George said. “I seriously doubted this could be the Reginald from the Fourth, but we had to be certain. Sato, please free the man.”

Mr. Chu sighed, his shoulders sagging in relief as Sato took off the handcuffs.

“I’m sure the two of you will have much to discuss as you get caught up on things,” Master George said. “Mr. Chu, I hope you’ll serve as a tutor to our young friend back in Reality Prime, help him grasp the complexities of the science that is so closely linked to his welfare.”

Mr. Chu didn’t look much happier than he had when he’d first entered the room, but he tried his best to smile. “I think Tick has a lot to teach me first.” He walked over and took Tick’s hand, and squeezed it hard as he shook it. “I’ll be expecting a full report, you hear me? And it’d better be good to explain everything I just went through. I think I’ll be avoiding dark streets and alleys for awhile.”

“Deal,” Tick said. “As long as you give *me* a full report too. I don’t even know why you’re *here*.”

Mr. Chu laughed, his face finally winning a victory and looking genuinely pleased, like the teacher Tick had always known. “Yeah, me neither.”

“Very well, then,” Master George said. “Sato, please take Mr. Chu and debrief him one last time. I’d also like to speak to him before we send him on his way.”

“Follow me,” Sato said curtly, standing at the door.

Mr. Chu patted Tick on the shoulder. “Real pleasant people you associate with, Tick. Can’t wait to spend some more quality time with your friend Sato here.”

“Could be worse—could be Billy ‘The Goat’ Cooper.”

“Good point. See ya back in Deer Park. Take care, okay?”

“You, too.”

Mr. Chu hesitated, sharing a long look with Tick, then left with Sato, who closed the door behind him.

“Right, then,” Master George said, clapping his hands together. “Atticus, I’ll put all of your study materials, this binder, and your other belongings in a suitcase of sorts and wink it straight to your room. I’m quite good at that by now. I promise not to destroy any more walls. As for you—your parents are

waiting for you to appear in the forest near your home. Near the heavy Chi'karda spot we've used in the past."

Tick blinked. "Right now?"

The old man nodded. "Right now."

Despite everything, a laugh croaked out of Tick's parched throat. "Sweet. I'm ready."

Master George's face grew serious. He came closer and sat back down in his chair, leaning in toward Tick. "Atticus, my dear young friend. I just don't know what to think. There has to be some secret about you we've yet to discover, some . . . well, *something*, anyway. Your abilities and influence over Chi'karda are just mind-boggling, and there *has* to be an explanation. I give you my word, we'll not rest until we figure it out."

"I know what it is," Tick whispered. "I'm a freak. Mistress Jane only tried to help me because she wanted my freak-boy powers."

Master George's face reddened, his lips trembling. Then he composed himself before speaking again. "Listen to me, young man, and listen to me well. Though I fully expect to discover something uncanny about you and your relationship to Chi'karda, I also know this: a large part of it has to do with *you*, and the kind of person you are."

"What do you mean?"

Master George leaned forward even more. "You, my friend, have an incredible amount of conviction. Courage. A sincerity of belief and principle. All of those things that make up the very essence of the power of Chi'karda. In other words, a considerable portion of your extraordinary gift comes from the simple fact that you very much want to do good. And for that, I'm proud to call you my friend."

Tick wasn't sure what he felt at that moment, but he knew if he tried to talk, it would come out sounding like a frog.

"And now," Master George said, patting Tick's hand, "off you go. I suspect your parents are quite anxious to have you home."

One Week Later

Touchdown!”

Tick’s dad leapt off the couch, dropping his game controller onto the floor as he started doing a horrific dance, waving one arm about like an elephant’s trunk as he shimmied back and forth.

“Tippy toe left, tippy toe right,” Dad sang. “Our team’s the best, we’re outta sight!”

“Dad,” Tick groaned, not too happy about losing once again in Football 3000—in overtime, no less. The awful victory dance only made it worse, and the old man didn’t show signs of stopping anytime soon, shaking his larger-than-usual rear end from side to side.

“Watermelon, watermelon, watermelon rind! Look at the scoreboard and see who’s behind!”

“Dad, the neighbors might be watching through the window. Please stop.”

“Two, four, six, eight . . . okay, that’s enough.” Dad flopped back onto the couch, breathing deeply as if he’d just run a six-minute mile. “Whew, all that celebratin’ can really wear a man out. I wish you’d win more often and make it easier on me.”

“Hilarious. One more game?”

Dad leaned over to pick up the controller. “You sure enjoy punishment, don’t you?”

Just then, Tick’s mom walked in, and without saying a word, she sat next to her husband. Tick felt his heart drop when he saw the look on her face, like she’d just been told she had cancer or lost a child.

“Mom, what’s wrong?” Tick asked, feeling the controller slip out of his hands.

She didn’t answer for a moment, staring at the floor. Finally, she looked up, her eyes haunted. “Atticus, I can’t take it anymore. I have to tell you something. I told your dad several months ago—when he broke the news to me that you’d gone off to be recruited by the Realitants.”

“Honey—” Dad began, but cut off at a sharp look from Mom. “Well, I guess he does deserve to know.” He glanced over at Tick. “Don’t worry—it’s pretty neat, actually.”

“Neat,” Mom said in a deadpan voice. “Once again, Edgar, you’ve summed things up so eloquently.” She reached over and squeezed Dad’s hand. “Which is why I love you.”

“What are you guys talking about?” Tick asked, much louder than he’d

meant to.

“Watch your tone, young man,” Mom said as she folded her hands in her lap. “It’s just that, well, I feel so bad for not telling you before. I think it might have helped you a little, helped you feel more confident. But then again, if I’d known before you winked away that first time, I might have locked you up in a dog kennel.”

“Uh . . . sweetie?” Dad said. “Maybe you should actually tell him what you’re talking about.”

Mom looked at Tick for several seconds without saying anything. Then, surprising him, she smiled. “I think the best way to tell you is to show you.”

As Tick watched, he felt like the laws of gravity had just intensified, pressing him into his seat.

Through the neck of her red blouse, his mom pulled something out that was attached to a golden chain. A pendant. A Barrier Wand pendant, exactly like the one dangling against Tick’s chest. He reached up and touched it through his shirt, his eyes stuck on the pendant in his mom’s hand. His mouth opened, but no words came out.

“Now before you fall apart,” she said, gripping her pendant in her fist, “hear me out. I only kept this from you and your dad because I was under strict orders from Master George. He wanted to wait until you were old enough to accept it. Well, I think it’s high time—especially now that he’s sending Mothball and Rutger to us like ordinary mailmen.”

“Mothball’s a woman,” Tick whispered, and somewhere deep down inside, he knew it was exactly the kind of ridiculous statement that pops out of someone who is in complete shock.

“Sorry,” Mom said. “Mail *persons*. Anyway, yes, I was a Realitant recruit many years ago and earned my pendant. Back then, it was all about science—none of the dangerous things that are happening now. In fact, I left the group right after”—she paused, touching her lips as if holding back tears—“right after I met your dad. I wanted a normal family life, and Master George let me leave on amicable terms. I should have known that one day he’d go after one of my children.”

“I can’t believe it,” Tick said.

His mom folded her arms defiantly. “Well, why *not*? I know more about science and quantum physics than most people, thank you very much. And now that all of this is out, I can tell you one more thing. I expect you to hit those books Master George sent with a passion, and I’ll be on top of you every step of the way, quizzing and pushing. You’ve got a lot to learn, son. A lot.”

“How did I end up with all these smart people?” Dad asked to no one in particular.

“Hush, Edgar,” Mom whispered, patting him on the knee.

Dad looked at Tick. “I love when she says that.”

Tick stood up, surprised he could do so—everything seemed to spin around him. “You’ve got . . . to be . . . *kidding* me.”

“Now, look here—” his mom began.

“No, Mom, that’s not what I mean.”

“Then what *do* you mean?” Her eyebrows shot up when Tick laughed out loud.

“It’s just . . . that’s the coolest thing I’ve ever heard. *My* mom was a Realitant.” He took a seat again on the couch. “I guess it’s finally official where I got my brains from.” He paused. “Uh, no offense, Dad.”

Later that night, Tick sat in front of the fireplace, staring into the flickering flames. Fall had settled in on Deer Park, making everything cool and crisp. Dad was too stubborn to turn the heater on just yet, so Tick warmed himself before heading up to bed.

As he sat there, almost in a daze, fingering the Barrier Wand pendant through his shirt, his thoughts spun. He’d be fourteen years old in a couple of weeks—hard to believe. How different his life had become in just one year. Not only was he a member of a group that studied and worked to protect alternate realities, he had some freaky power that was completely out of control. He’d been pulled from school to be taught full-time by his mom, with weekly lessons with Mr. Chu, and was monitored constantly for any signs of Chi’karda trouble. It wouldn’t be proper to cause an earthquake and destroy half the town of Deer Park.

And always, always, there was the threat of a call for help from Master George. Who knew what waited on the other side of the horizon?

My mom was a Realitant, he thought. *Holy—*

A tap on his shoulder interrupted his thoughts. He turned to see Kayla, holding a teddy bear in one hand, a red-and-black scarf in the other. Her curly blonde hair brushed the shoulders of her pink pajamas.

“Well, what are *you* doing?” he asked, reaching out to ruffle her hair.

“This nasty old scarf was in my closet. Mommy said you lost your other ones.”

Tick looked at the dusty scarf clutched in her hand. He had to admit he’d thought about the missing scarf and his birthmark a few times in the last few weeks. It still made him uncomfortable to think people might be gawking at the ugly red thing on his neck. But for all that, he realized he never cared about it much when it was just Paul and Sofia around.

Kayla held out the scarf. “Want it?”

Tick took the scarf, then ran it through his hands, staring at the oh-so-familiar pattern of red and black. “Kayla, if I let you do something, do you *promise* not to tell Mom and Dad?”

“Will I get in trouble?”

“No—but I don’t want you to tell them. Don’t worry—this isn’t a bad thing. It’s a really good thing, actually. But we don’t want them to worry, now do we?”

Kayla shook her head.

“I want you to throw this into the fire.”

Her eyes lit up, almost as bright as the flames. She looked for all the world like he’d just offered her a lifetime pass to Disneyland. Burning things had always been the one no-no of which she was notoriously guilty.

“Really?” she asked, licking her lips.

“Really. But just this once, okay? You’d better not burn anything else. Promise?”

She nodded her head. “I promise.”

Tick handed her the scarf and scooted out of the way. “Go for it.”

Kayla wadded up the cloth into a ball, then stepped close to the fireplace. She looked one last time at Tick, as if she thought the opportunity had to be too good to be true. When he just nodded encouragingly, she turned back and threw the scarf into the fire. It took a second to catch, but then smoke billowed up as the flames began to eat away at the material. They both watched as it burned to ashes.

Tick stood up and gave her a hug. “Good job. You’re the best pyro I’ve ever met.”

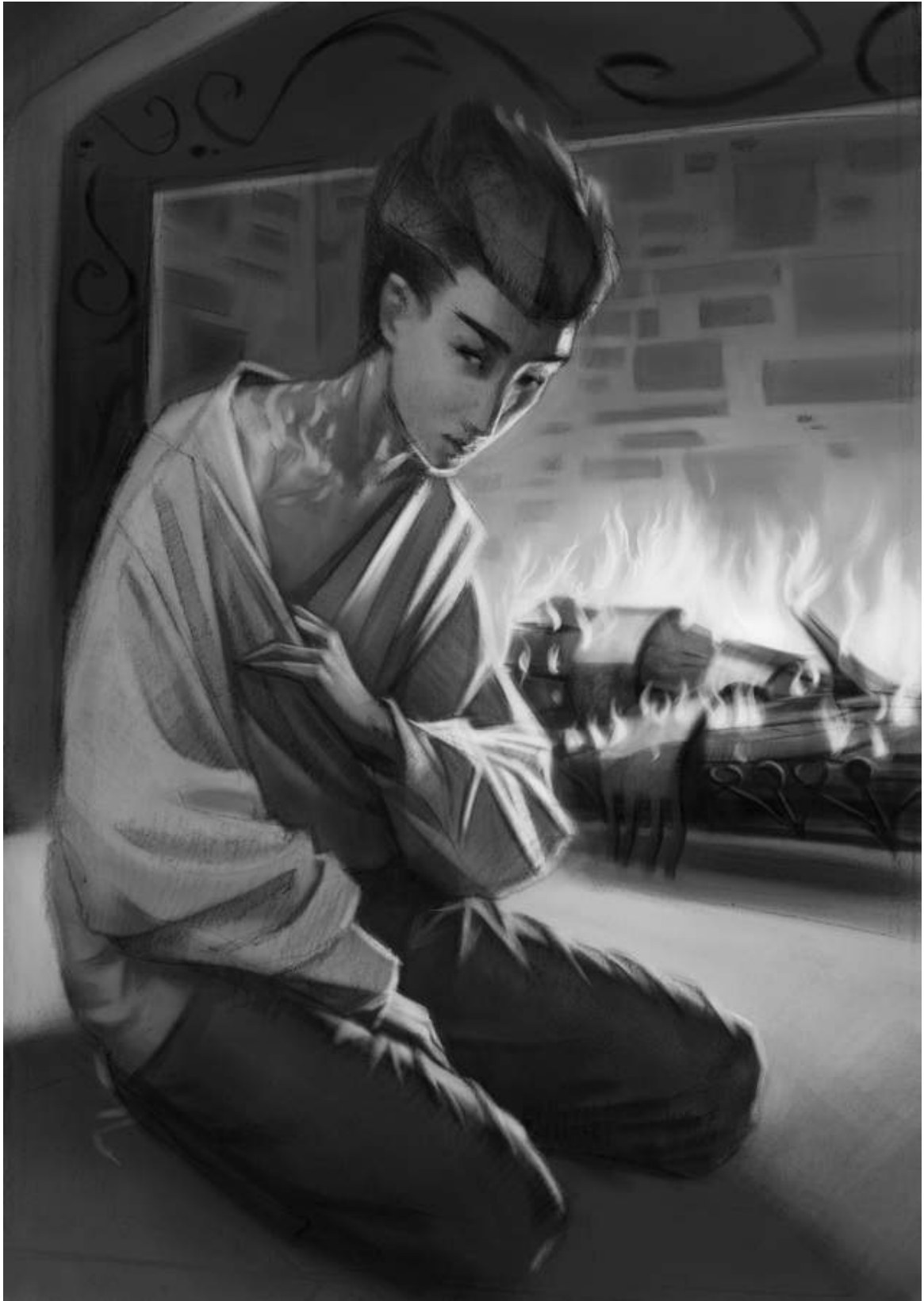
“What’s a pie-row?”

“Nothing. You better get up to bed or Mom will take that teddy bear away.”

“Kay. Good night.” She turned and ran out of the room, shuffling along with her tiny footsteps.

Tick watched her go, then thought of the stack of Realitant and science books sitting on his desk upstairs. “I’ve got a lot of work to do,” he said aloud to no one but himself.

He reached down and turned off the fire, then headed for his room.



Yellow and Red

Frazier Gunn hadn't spoken to Mistress Jane for more than two months.

As he stood in the dark stone corridor outside her room, he suddenly wished he had another two months. This summons had been unexpected, and he felt the uncomfortable sweat of fear slicking his palms. Everyone in the castle knew something horrible had happened to Jane; they'd all heard the screams coming from her chambers, often long into the night.

She'd gone through no less than eleven servants—only half of them surviving to tell about it, though it did Frazier little good, since they all had sworn a vow of silence, on penalty of death.

Frazier steeled himself, wiped his hands on his pants, and knocked on the door.

On the third thunk, the door swung open violently, slamming against the stone wall on the other side.

"Enter, Frazier."

It was a voice he barely recognized. Raw and scratchy—*weak*, as if Jane had swallowed a glass of lava, scorching her throat and vocal chords.

"Enter," she repeated.

Frazier couldn't see where she was in the room.

He stepped across the threshold, then closed the door. The only light in the room was a fire, burning hotly with several fresh logs, spitting and cracking. With a shudder, he remembered back to Jane's flying cinder display, and he hoped there'd be no repeat tonight.

"You called for me?" Frazier asked the darkness.

A figure stepped out of the shadows behind a deep wardrobe in the corner between the bed and a large open window, where curtains fluttered in the breeze. Though Frazier could not yet see any details, he knew it was his boss. But she appeared to have something draped over her head.

"It's good to see you again, Mistress Jane," he said, fighting to keep his voice steady.

"My dear Frazier," she said, her voice the sound of rocks rubbing on sandpaper. "You will never know how very good it is to see *you*."

For the first time, Frazier realized there was a slight hollowness to her voice, as if it were muffled by something over her mouth. Subtle, but there all the same.

"That means a lot to me," he finally said. And he meant it.

“I’ve often been . . . cruel to you,” Jane said, taking a step forward. Though she was still mostly in shadow, Frazier could see that she wore a long, flowing robe, its hood pulled up over her head. Something glinted off her face, a flickering reflection from the fire.

Must be her glasses, Frazier thought.

“You’ve only ever done that which needed to be done,” he said. “I know I’ll have my reward some day, when we make the Realities as they were meant to be.”

“Frazier,” she whispered.

“Yes, Mistress Jane?”

“I want you to know that I love you as if you were my own brother. I promise never to be cruel to you again.”

Frazier felt a strange mixture of elation and sick fear. “The feeling is mutual.” His hands were sweating even worse than before. So was his face.

“That makes me happy, Frazier. Very, very happy.”

Mistress Jane stepped out into the full light of the fire, and a puff of sharp air escaped Frazier’s lips before he could stop it. He took a step backward, cursing himself silently as soon as he did.

The floor-length robe that draped over her head and shoulders and body was a brilliant yellow, glowing like molten gold in the flickering light of the flames. Where her face should have been, a red mask floated, bright as fresh blood. Though it sparkled like shiny metal, its surface moved and flowed, creating subtle facial expressions, alternating between anger, sadness, excitement, confusion, joy, pain. Small holes, as dark as the deepest depths of the ocean, made up her eyes, and somehow Frazier knew she was looking at him through the mask.

“Mistress Jane . . .” was all he could get out.

The flowing, red metal mask solidified into a stark expression of rage, eyebrows slanted up from the nose like a big V.

“*He* did this to me, Frazier,” she said, her raspy voice bitter and tight. “I tried so hard to make him see—to work with him, to *help* him. But in the end, he looked at me and threw all of his powers against me. He *hurt* me, Frazier. I will always be in pain now.”

“Who?” Frazier asked. “Who did this to you? What . . .” He almost asked her what was hidden beneath the yellow robe, but he knew better.

She turned her red mask to look at the fire as she continued speaking. “But perhaps it was for the best. I’ve been reminded of my life’s duty. I’ve been reminded how cold and cruel the Realities can be. I’ve been reminded of the goals I set so many years ago. And I’ve been reminded of what kind of person it takes to accomplish . . . what we *need* to accomplish.”

“Yes, Mistress Jane,” he answered fervently. “I’ll be by your side. Always.”

“If I ever falter again, Frazier—if I ever doubt myself or doubt the things I need to do and the way in which I need to do them, I want you to do me a favor.”

“Anything.”

“I want you to say two words to me. Two words. It’ll be all the reminder I ever need.”

“What words, Mistress?” Frazier asked.

Jane looked back in his direction, the darkness of her eyeholes boring into him out of the shiny red mask of liquid metal. And then she told him.

“Atticus Higginbottom.”

Discussion Questions

1. Tick sees a film of his Alterant being destroyed in another Reality. Can you imagine seeing yourself going through something like that? How would that make you feel?
2. Mistress Jane changes a lot throughout the book. Was there any point you started to feel sorry for her or even like her? Do you feel like she's pure evil? Why do you think Frazier stays faithful to her?
3. Tick's parents let him go off on another Realitnant adventure, despite the obvious danger. What do you think about their decision? Could you believe in your child enough to let them go off to the unknown like that?
4. Tick knows something is wrong when he sees Mr. Chu near the forest at the beginning of the story. If you met an Alterant of someone very close to you, do you think you'd be able to tell the difference? Even if they looked *exactly* the same?
5. Sato is sent on an incredibly dangerous mission to obtain a blood sample from a world inhabited by crazy people. Tick, Paul, and Sofia are also asked to do very difficult things. Think honestly about yourself: Would you have enough courage to do difficult tasks? Do you think you could solve Chu's riddles?
6. What was your favorite part of the book? What would you change if you were the author? Who is your favorite character? Your least favorite?
7. How do you think it feels for Tick to know he has some kind of incredible power over science within him, yet no control over it? To know that if he *loses* control, he could hurt a lot of people? How would you deal with that kind of pressure?
8. If you had to guess, what would you predict for the plot of Book 3? What do you hope happens? What do you hope *doesn't* happen?

A Glossary of People, Places, and All Things Important

Atticus Higginbottom—A Realitant from the state of Washington in Reality Prime.

Alterant—Different versions of the same person existing in different Realities. It is extremely dangerous for Alterants to meet one another.

Annika—A spy for the Realitants who was killed by a pack of fangen.

Barf Scarf—The red-and-black scarf that Tick wears to hide the ugly birthmark on his neck.

Barrier Wand—The device used to wink people and things between Realities and between heavily concentrated places of Chi’karda within the *same* Reality. Works very easily with inanimate objects, and can place them almost anywhere. Humans must be in a place with concentrated Chi’karda (like a cemetery) and have a nanolocator that transmits their location to the Wand in order to be transported. Useless without a Chi’karda Drive, which channels and magnifies the mysterious power.

Benson—A servant of Reginald Chu in the Fourth Reality.

Bermuda Triangle—The most concentrated area of Chi’karda in each Reality. Still unknown as to why.

Billy “The Goat” Cooper—Tick’s biggest nemesis at Jackson Middle School.

Chi’karda—The mysterious force that controls quantum physics. The scientific embodiment of conviction and choice, which in reality rules the universe. Responsible for creating the different Realities.

Chi’karda Drive—The invention that revolutionized the universe, the drive is able to harness, magnify, and control Chi’karda. It has long been believed that travel between Realities is impossible without it.

Chu Industries—The company that practically rules the world of the Fourth Reality. Known for countless inventions and technologies, including many that are malicious in nature.

Command Center—Master George’s headquarters in the Bermuda Triangle, where Chi’karda levels are monitored and to where his many nanolocators report various types of information. Heavily damaged by the forces of Mistress Jane and currently under repair.

Darkin Project (Dark Infinity)—A menacing, giant device created by Reginald Chu of the Fourth Reality. May be the source of a plague of insanity sweeping the Realities.

Earwig Transponder—An insect-like device inserted into the ear which can scramble listening devices and help track its host.

Edgar Higginbottom—Tick's father.

Entropy—The law of nature that states all things move toward destruction. Related to fragmentation.

Fangen—The sickening abomination of a creature created by Mistress Jane, utilizing the mutated version of Chi'karda found in the Thirteenth Reality. Formed from a variety of no less than twelve different animals, the short and stocky fangen are bred to kill and ask questions later. They can also fly.

Fragmentation—What happens to a Reality when it begins losing Chi'karda levels on a vast scale due to entropy. Can no longer maintain itself as a major alternate version of the world, and will eventually disintegrate into nothing.

Frazier Gunn—A loyal servant of Mistress Jane.

Frupey—Nickname for Fruppenschneiger, Sofia's butler.

Gnat Rat—A malicious invention of Chu Industries in the Fourth Reality. Releases dozens of mechanical hornets that are programmed to attack a certain individual based on a nanolocator, DNA, or blood type.

Grand Canyon—A satellite location of the Realitants. Second only to the Bermuda Triangle in Chi'karda levels. Still unknown as to why.

Grinder Beast—An enormous, rhinoceros-like creature with dozens of legs. Found in the Tenth Reality.

Hans Schtiggenclubberheimer—The man who started the scientific revolution in the Fourth Reality in the early nineteen-hundreds. In a matter of decades, he helped catapult the Fourth far beyond the other Realities in terms of technology.

Haunce, The—A mystery of the Realities that Master George has yet to explain.

Henry—A boy from the Industrial Barrens of the Seventh Reality.

Hillenstat—A Realitant doctor from the Second Reality.

Jimmy "The Voice" Porter—A Realitant from the Twelfth Reality. He has no tongue.

Katrina Kay—A Realitant from the Ninth Reality.

Kayla Higginbottom—Tick's little sister.

Klink—Guard of the Execution Exit at the End of the Road Insane Asylum.

Kyoopy—Nickname used by the Realitants for quantum physics.

Lemon Fortress—Mistress Jane's castle in the Thirteenth Reality.

Lisa Higginbottom—Tick's older sister.

Lorena Higginbottom—Tick’s mother.

Mabel Fredrickson—Tick’s great-aunt in Alaska.

Master George—The current leader of the Realitants.

Metaspide—A vicious robotic creature from the Fourth Reality that resembles a spider. Chu’s security force.

Mistress Jane—A former Realitant and ruler of the Thirteenth Reality. Has an uncanny power over Chi’karda.

Mothball—A Realitant from the Fifth Reality.

Ms. Sears—Tick’s favorite librarian.

Muffintops—Master George’s cat.

Multiverse—An old term used by Reality Prime scientists to explain the theory that quantum physics had created multiple versions of the universe.

Nancy Zeppelin—A Realitant from Wisconsin in Reality Prime.

Nanolocator—A microscopic electronic device that can crawl into a person’s skin and forever provide information on their whereabouts, including Chi’karda levels.

Nonex—When Alterants meet, one disappears and enters the Nonex. A complete mystery to the Realitants.

Norbert Johnson—A post office worker in Alaska who helped Tick and his dad escape an attack by Frazier Gunn.

Paul Rogers—A Realitant from Florida in Reality Prime.

Phillip—Owner and operator of The Stroke of Midnight Inn in the Sixth Reality.

Pick—Master George’s nickname for a major decision in which Chi’karda levels spike considerably. Some Picks have been known to create or destroy entire Realities.

Priscilla Persephone—A Realitant from the Seventh Reality.

Quantum Physics—The science that studies the physical world of the extremely small. Most scholars are baffled by its properties and at a loss to explain them. Theories abound. Only a few know the truth: that a completely different power rules this realm, which in turn rules the universe: Chi’karda.

Quinton Hallenhaffer—A Realitant from the Second Reality.

Ragers (Static Ragers)—An advanced weapon that harnesses extreme amounts of static electricity. When unleashed, it collects matter in a ball that can shatter whatever gets in its way.

Realitants—An organization sworn to discover and chart all known Realities. Founded in the 1970s by a group of scientists from the Fourth Reality, who then used Barrier Wands to recruit other quantum physicists from other Realities.

Realities—A separate and complete version of the world, of which there

may be an infinite number. The most stable and strongest is called Reality Prime. So far, twelve major branches off Reality Prime have been discovered. Realities are created and destroyed by enormous fluctuations in Chi'karda levels. Examples:

Fourth—Much more technologically advanced than the other Realities due to the remarkable vision and work of Hans Schtiggenschlubberheimer.

Fifth—Quirks in evolution led to a very tall human race.

Eighth—The world is covered in water due to much higher temperatures caused by a star fusion anomaly triggered in another galaxy by an alien race.

Eleventh—Quirks in evolution and diet led to a short and robust human race.

Thirteenth—Somehow a mutated and very powerful version of Chi'karda exists here.

Reginald Chu—Tick's science teacher in Reality Prime. His Alterant is from the Fourth Reality and founded Chu Industries and turned it into a worldwide empire.

Renee—An inmate at the End of the Road Insane Asylum.

Ripple Quake—A violent geological disaster caused by a massive disturbance in Chi'karda.

Rutger—A Realitant from the Eleventh Reality.

Sally T. Jones—A Realitant from the Tenth Reality.

Sato—A Realitant from Japan in Reality Prime.

Shockpulse—An injection of highly concentrated electromagnetic nanobots that seek out and destroy the tiny components of a nanolocator, rendering it useless.

Shurric—Short for Sonic Hurricaner, more powerful version of the Sound Slicer. Shoots out a heavily concentrated force of sound waves almost too low for the human ear to register but powerful enough to destroy just about anything in its direct path.

Slinkbeast—A vicious creature that lives in the Mountains of Sorrow in the Twelfth Reality.

Snooper Bug—A hideous crossbreed of birds and insects created by the mutated power of the Chi'karda in the Thirteenth Reality. Can detect any known weapon or poison and can kill with one quick strike of its needle-nosed beak. Pets of Mistress Jane.

Sofia Pacini—A Realitant from Italy in Reality Prime.

Soulkens—A mystery of the Realities that Master George has yet to explain.

Sound Slicer—A small weapon outdated by the much more powerful Shurric.

Spinner—A special device that shoots out a circular plane of laser, displaying video images on its surface.

Tick—Nickname for Atticus Higginbottom.

Tingle Wraith—A collection of microscopic animals from the Second Reality, called spilphens, that can form together into a cloud while rubbing against each other to make a horrible sound called the Death Siren.

William Schmidt—A Realitant from the Third Reality.

Windbike—An invention of Chu Industries, this vehicle is a motorcycle that can fly, consuming hydrogen out of the air for its fuel. Based on an extremely complex gravity-manipulation theorem first proposed by Reginald Chu.

Winking—The act of traveling between or within Realities by use of a Barrier Wand. Causes a slight tingle to the skin on one's shoulders and back.

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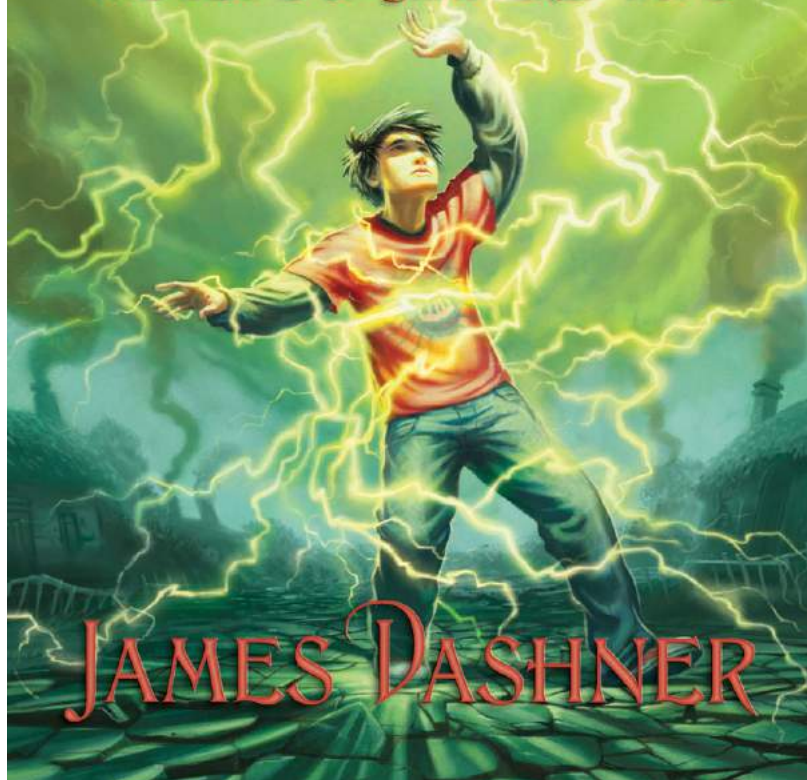
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THE 13TH REALITY

THE BLADE OF SHATTERED HOPE



JAMES DASHNER

13th Reality

The Blade of Shattered Hope

Volume 3

James Dashner



**DESERET
BOOK**

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For Ben and the rest of the Egons.

So many memories—
most of them embarrassing,
all of them good.

~

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But most of all, I want to thank you—the reader. Thank you for being here.

The Lake

Bryan Cannon looked at the catfish—its bone-like whiskers, its slimy skin, its dark, unblinking eyes—and he saw death. For the creature, of course, not himself. Dinner would be fine and tasty tonight.

The day was beautiful. A slight coolness crisped the air, balanced perfectly by the brilliant sun shining down on Bryan's boat, sparkling off the waters that surrounded him, dancing like fairies of light. Too bad this fish wasn't enjoying things as much as he was.

Bryan had caught the fish in the little body of water in which he floated—called, quite pretentiously, *Lake* Norman. But if that tiny spit of rain-washed sludge was classified as a lake, then Bryan's toilet at home constituted a big pond. He chuckled to himself, as he often did at his own jokes, and spiked another squirmy worm onto his hook. Bryan shifted to get comfortable then he cast the line.

His small canoe rocked at the movement, sending gentle waves rippling across the lake's surface. He watched the outermost wrinkle, enjoying how it traveled along like it didn't have a care in the world. Bryan always loved it when he could keep his eyes trained on the tiny wave until it actually hit the shore. It wasn't as easy as it sounded, and his eyes watered with the effort.

There it goes, he thought, getting smaller and smaller, smaller and smaller . . . there! It hit right over by that sandy—

Splash!

A disturbance in the water, right where the lake met the shore. Then another splash, a huge one, that sprayed droplets all over the small beach. Bryan had been staring right at the spot, so he knew no one had jumped in.

Yet another splash. Then another. It looked like some kid thrashing about with his arms, trying to douse all of his friends in the face. Bryan used to love doing that when he'd been a kid.

There was only one problem. There wasn't a kid anywhere in sight. Or an adult, for that matter. Nobody.

The disturbance continued. Curious, Bryan laid his fishing pole along the length of the canoe and reached for his paddle. Never taking his eyes off the white-water display, he lowered the tip down into the lake and began paddling his way over to check things out. He figured only one of three things was possible.

One, they had themselves a ghost right here in Lake Norman.

Two, some vicious sea monster had found itself a way to the lake from the ocean.

Or three, Bryan Cannon had finally flipped his lid and gone bonkers.

The closer he approached, the worse the splashing. Great cascades of water shot up everywhere—five, ten feet in the air. A curtain of spray unfurled next to him as he rowed along, the water soaking him and sluicing down the sides of the boat. For the first time, terror crept through Bryan's innards, and he realized it might not have been the smartest thing in the world to come so close to whatever *thing* was under the water.

He stopped paddling, slowing to a drift. As he did so, the splashing abruptly ceased. In a matter of seconds, the surface of the lake grew relatively calm, the small waves lapping against his canoe the only evidence anything had happened at all. If anything, the sudden stillness only scared Bryan more. He stared at the spot.

Something started rising out of the water.

Bryan shrieked as he saw what looked like an upside-down glass bowl break the surface of the lake like a bubble, shimmering like wet crystal. The bubble formed into the rough shape of a head, although there were no eyes or nose or mouth. Rising higher, the thing had a neck, and then shoulders, all made out of water. Up and up it rose, *forming* itself, growing out of the lake's surface like a demon rising from its grave. Before long, a human-shaped creature of water stood in front of Bryan, floating on clear feet, the sun casting spectrum-colored glimmers of light as it shone through the apparition.

Bryan sucked in a huge gulp of air, ready to let out the biggest scream of his life. But before he could do it, the watery ghost held up its arms and a sudden wave of water exploded from under its feet, crashing forward and down toward the canoe. Hundreds, maybe thousands of gallons of water, slammed on top of Bryan like a deluge from ancient and angry gods.

Bryan Cannon would never eat a catfish again.

~

If the waterkelt had a brain, it might've been impressed with its display of power. If the creature had a heart, it might've felt ashamed for causing the death of an innocent person. It had neither, so it simply walked its way to the shore and up into the surrounding trees, leaving behind a wet and muddy trail.

It knew where to go and what to do when it got there. So did its companion, which had been created on the other side of the lake. Their bodies sparkled and flashed in the sunlight like glistening quicksilver as they marched toward their duty.

Only their creator, Mistress Jane, understood the irony of the situation as she observed from a place very far away. Water, the basic element which

sustains all human life, was about to be used for quite the opposite.

First stop, the Higginbottom house.

And then—revenge.

Part 1

The Dark Basement

Two Very Different Missions

Sato shivered, then grimaced. His rain-soaked clothes felt icky against his skin; it felt as if an army of leeches clung to him for dear life. He'd stood in the open for barely a minute, trying to figure out where he'd arrived exactly. Drenched already, he looked about, confused.

The air had the feel of twilight, though he knew it was almost noon in this Reality. The reason for the darkness floated above him—massive, heavy clouds of gray-black that were emptying their contents on his sopping-wet head. The clouds seemed close enough to touch. George had warned him that this Reality was a dreary, dreadful place where it rained constantly. Sato couldn't have agreed more.

But he saw no tombstones, no plaques planted in the ground to mark graves. He stood on concrete—or something like it. Hard and flat, the ground was dotted with regularly-spaced holes to drain away the water as quickly as it fell. Sato was glad for that. He didn't relish the idea of standing in a deep pool of water.

Why do I always get stuck with these jobs? Sato thought to himself. If it wasn't a windy, snow-swept mountaintop insane asylum, it was a rainy parking lot supposedly full of dead people. Fun stuff.

He noticed a small, square building about forty feet away, a scarce shadow in the wet darkness. No lights shone from any windows or outdoor fixtures. Seeing nothing else in any direction except the flat expanse of hole-dotted pavement, Sato walked toward the dark building.

As he sloshed his way across the ground, he wished he had a companion with him. Grumbling alone was no fun. Why hadn't George at least given him an umbrella? Maybe next time the red-faced geezer would send Sato to the middle of the ocean without a boat, or maybe to the desert without water, or skydiving without a parachute.

Sato shivered and kept walking, his socks soaked through from the rain. The squishy chill felt like he was smashing hundreds of iced shrimp below his feet. If no one answered at the building, he'd send the signal immediately for Rutger to wink him back. They might have found their first dead-end in Sato's latest mission. A mission that creeped him out and left him in awe at the same time.

Oh, man, Tick, he thought. *What in the world does this all mean?*

As Sato got closer to the building, he noticed it had absolutely no markings of any kind—not a door, a window, or anything else he could see. It was made up of the same drab, no-color material of the ground, but smooth and unblemished. It was a perfect square, maybe ten feet in height and width.

He walked right up to the cube and put his hand out. Rain cascaded down the sides of the building in sheets, and when his hand made contact with the cool, hard wall, the water parted and washed across his skin, down his arm, and spilled onto the ground in tiny twin falls. Sato pulled his hand away and whipped it back and forth in a futile attempt to dry himself.

He was just about to call out the inevitable “Hello?” when he heard a loud thump and felt the ground tremble below his feet as if some giant beast from the underworld was trying to break free from its lair with a massive hammer. It happened only once, but Sato’s feet tingled from the vibration of the impact. Surprisingly, he didn’t feel afraid. Not yet, anyway.

There was a loud hiss, muted by the pounding rain, and then the wall directly in front of him began to move outward, toward him.

Sato felt anxiety grip his heart for the first time since arriving, and he stepped back, almost turned to run. But he quickly collected himself, reminding himself that George must have known where he’d been sending him after all. He had nothing to be afraid of.

He realized that it was only the bottom edge of the wall that was moving, swinging out and upward like an old-fashioned garage door. To his left and right, the side walls were doing the same, the groan of metallic hinges a faint squeal in the background. A soft light shone out from an unknown source, turning the thousands of raindrops into silvery sparkles. Sato could see through the cube to the other side where the fourth wall opposite him was opening up like its counterparts. Seconds later, the four walls locked into position parallel to the ground, and all movement stopped with a loud clank. Just a few feet above him, a wide shelter from the weather had formed, the doors and middle sections together now shaped like a square cross supported by four large metal pillars.

His fear gone, Sato stepped out of the rain toward the middle of what used to be a closed building and was now just a really fancy covered patio. He half-expected to see a picnic table or maybe a barbecue grill, but what he found instead surprised him greatly.

A hole.

A round hole, with a spiral set of stairs leading down into its depths and an iron handrail fastened to the wall. The light he’d noticed before was coming from somewhere at the bottom of the hole. Everything in sight was surprisingly dry. A small metal sign was bolted onto the floor right next to the first step, and several words had been stamped onto its surface:

Grace of Her Heart Cemetery

A prickle of fear raised bumps on Sato's flesh, but reason calmed his nerves soon enough. In a place where rain was the norm, it made perfect sense for the dead to be buried in some kind of vault or tomb instead of within the spongy, soaked, muddy earth. Dead people would be floating all over the place if they'd made that mistake. It was a cemetery after all—a normal, peaceful, full-of-bodies graveyard.

And over the last few weeks, Sato had become very used to graveyards.

Blowing a breath through his lips, he squeezed as much water as possible out of his clothes and hair, then set off down the stairs. With each step, an audible squish sounded, inexplicably making him want to laugh. Step by step, round and round, he descended into the hole. With every full circle he made, he saw a square light set into the wall, casting a warm glow—literally. Things heated up quickly and considerably.

After what felt like ten or so floors, Sato reached the bottom the of stairs and stepped through an open doorway. Unable to hold back a gasp of wonder, he gaped at the massive chamber in front of him. Row upon row of metal containers stretched as far as he could see, fading away into a shadowy mist in the distance. Large pillars supported the roof thirty feet or so above him, standing like iron angels guarding the dead.

For that's what filled the room. The dead. In metal caskets, stacked five high, with barely enough room between them for Sato to walk. Sato calculated there had to be thousands of deceased in the underground cemetery. Thousands upon thousands.

It took him four hours and forty-five minutes to find what he was looking for.

The casket looked like every other one in the vast tomb. Made from a dark steel, the slightest shade of silver prevented it from being utterly black. The final resting place of two other souls lay on top, two more beneath, with hundreds to either side. A dirty bronze plaque named the person whose body was inside the casket. Sato reached forward and wiped away the dust, more out of respect for the dead than anything else; he could read the words imprinted on the tarnished plaque just fine.

This was the seventh Reality in which he'd read such words.

It was the casket for Atticus Higginbottom.

~

Frazier Gunn had grown weary of prisons.

He'd now visited eleven of them, each one more foul than the one before it. Dirty. Grimy. Full of people with no self-control, no humanity. Full of thieves and murderers.

Now, walking down the dark, damp, smelly stone tunnel, escorted by two

massively strong Brazilian guards with machine guns, he wondered how much more of this he could take. It didn't help that Mistress Jane had refused to tell him the purpose of the mission he'd undertaken, only the whats and wheres. The hows. None of the whys.

He'd long since gotten over the shock of finding his prey in prison, each and every time. Without fail, his searches had ended at some sort of jail, penitentiary, detention center, or, in three memorable cases, a hospital for the criminally insane. Always in shady institutions run by shady men and women. Always in places where the right price could buy you anything. Were there places in the Realities where this was *not* the case? He doubted it.

They came to a wooden door, heavily bolted and reinforced with a thick chain and lock. The guard to his right grunted something in Portuguese, but Frazier understood him well enough. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a thick wad of cash, obtained that morning at a local bank, in the local currency. He was amazed how easy it was to come up with money when you had someone as powerful as Mistress Jane backing the operation.

When the guard reached for the cash, Frazier pulled his hand away.

"The prisoner," he said, keeping his voice as empty of emotion as possible. "Get me the prisoner."

The man grunted again. Frazier was fully aware that these two brutes could simply take the money and leave him for dead. But he'd been sure to fill their heads with hopes of future deals, future bribes, future money-making opportunities. They'd be idiots to jeopardize such possibilities. It was, of course, a complete lie. Frazier would never, not in a million years, return to this country in this Reality, certainly not to this wretched cesspool of lowlifes. He needed one thing here, and one thing only.

After a long stare-off, the guard finally pulled out his jangly ring of keys and unlocked the chain and the three bolts of the door. He swung the door open, the hinges squealing like tortured rats, then disappeared inside, making it clear with a scowl that Frazier should wait for him to return. Frazier was more than happy to wait, having seen more than enough prisoners and jail cells in the last few weeks.

He stood next to the other fellow, a sour-faced, bearded giant of a man, who looked at the floor and never spoke a word. Frazier could only imagine what darkness lurked inside the man's brain, what memories haunted his dreams at night. For the slightest of moments, Frazier felt sorry for the man.

Several minutes passed, the only sounds that of breathing and a constant, echoing drip of water somewhere down the tunnel. Finally, the guard returned with the prisoner for which Frazier had paid handsomely. The eleventh such prisoner, the eleventh such bribe. And, according to his boss, worth every

penny.

The woman stepped forward, still shackled at the wrist. Her black hair was a nest of greasy strings, her torn clothes were filthy, and her long fingernails were crusted with black dirt. For a moment, she refused to meet Frazier's eyes. Irritated, he reached forward and put his hand under her chin, tilting her face up so he could get a good look.

Despite her pale complexion, the smudges of grime, the cracked lips, and the way her skin seemed to squeeze the sharp bones of her skull, he had no doubt, none whatsoever. She was still beautiful to him.

Frazier handed the money to the guard, who then passed over the key to the chains around the prisoner's—the *former* prisoner's—wrist. Frazier nodded once, curtly, then took hold of the woman's arm.

Without saying a word, he turned and escorted the Alterant of Mistress Jane down the long and dark tunnel.

The Kyoopy Quiz

Okay,” Mr. Chu said, leaning both his elbows on his desk at school and staring down at the open physics book. “If you get this one right, you are The Man. That’s capital T, capital M.”

“Hit me,” Tick responded. Even he could hear the tiredness in his own voice. He’d been studying with Mr. Chu for more than an hour, question after question. Tick was schooled at home now since Master George had insisted that it was too dangerous for Tick to be out and about with classmates and the general public every day. But enough time had passed that Tick had finally convinced his parents and Master George to let him visit Mr. Chu three times a week in the afternoons. Any break from the house was welcome, even if it did involve his former teacher grilling him with questions about physics. Mr. Chu glanced up before continuing, a grin spreading across his face. Tick faltered a moment, hating how much the man looked like his Alterant from the Fourth Reality. Like Reginald Chu. The *evil* Reginald Chu, who was stuck—uncomfortably, Tick hoped—in a place called the Nonex. Too bad Master George didn’t have a clue as to where the Nonex was, or what it was, or anything else about it at all.

“Okay,” Mr. Chu said, speaking slowly. “How does the wave-particle property paradox contradict the theorems related to radiation damping and nonlinearity in the pilot wave interpretation of quantum mechanics?”

Tick slumped back in his chair. He barely understood the question, much less knew the answer. Figuring his brain had finally gone to sleep, he murmured, “I give up. My head’s not working right now.”

Mr. Chu laughed, and any remnant of his Alterant was wiped away in a flash. “I was just kidding. I’m not sure the question even made sense, actually.”

Tick couldn’t help but feel relieved. He needed to understand quantum physics and all the sciences in order to figure out what was wrong with him. He had an extremely dangerous influence over Chi’karda, the force that ruled the world of quantum physics—or QP, as Mr. Chu liked to call it—and Tick had very nearly killed himself and countless others when his Chi’karda had gotten out of control just a few months ago.

Since then, he’d been careful not to get too excited or too angry. So far nothing bad had happened—except for the time he’d sent his poor dad flying

across the room and through an upstairs window. If it hadn't been for that bush . . . Well, needless to say, the bush didn't survive, but his dad—whose weight was classified somewhere between pudgy and ginormous—did. Though he had complained about a hurt back for weeks, sending Tick on countless runs to the kitchen to get him cookies and milk to enjoy during their videogame battles.

“Tick?” Mr. Chu asked, snapping his fingers.

Tick realized he'd been staring at the floor, completely lost in his thoughts. “Oh. Sorry. I was just thinking about something.”

Mr. Chu yawned, then closed the science book with a loud thump. “Well, you've got a lot to think about. Any problems lately?”

“No.” He looked into his teacher's eyes, trying to see if he could read anything there. The man had been through just as much as Tick had, and Tick worried about him. “What about you? Have you . . . gotten over it?”

“Gotten over what? Being imprisoned by a bunch of thugs, forced to torment you and your friends, almost killed? What's there to get over?”

Tick shook his head, trying not to look sad, but knowing he did. Thinking back to what had happened in the Fourth Reality, and everything that led up to it, always made him sad. He didn't even really understand why—or at least he told himself that. After all, they'd escaped. They were safe. All seemed fine in the world.

But deep down, he knew why he felt sad. He knew all too well.

It was her. It was Mistress Jane. What he'd *done* to her.

“Tick,” Mr. Chu repeated, snapping his fingers again. “What's buzzing in that brain of yours?”

“I didn't mean to hurt her,” Tick said, almost whispering. His heart felt like a squishy pile of mud. “I don't even know exactly what I did to her. For all we know, I killed her.”

Mr. Chu stood up, shaking his head. “Enough of that.” He picked up the book and slid it inside Tick's backpack, then held the pack out toward him. “Seriously. You shouldn't feel one ounce of guilt for something that happened completely out of your control.”

Tick didn't respond, just reached out and took his backpack, slipping the straps over his shoulders.

“I'm not even going to talk about it with you anymore,” Mr. Chu continued. “Maybe that's making your subconscious mind think it's something you *should* feel guilty about, something you should come to terms with, seek forgiveness for. Well, it's not. As soon as blame the wood for killing with fire.”

“Huh?” Tick asked.

Mr. Chu shrugged. “Sorry. It was the best I could come up with.”

For some reason, that made Tick feel better. “I’m fine, I guess. It’s just that . . . she seemed like maybe she was starting to feel bad about being so evil. I thought maybe she was going to change, maybe even help us.”

Mr. Chu put two fingers together and swiped them across his lips like pulling a zipper.

Tick rolled his eyes. “Fine. Well, thanks for helping me study. I’ll see ya next week.”

“Sounds like a plan. Study the chapter on natural electricity’s role in physics carefully. A lot of things build off that information.”

“I will. See ya.”

“Take care.” Mr. Chu smiled then, and he looked nothing like his diabolical twin who had almost driven billions of people permanently insane.

Tick turned and headed out the door, deciding at the last second to swing by the city library to check his e-mail before going home. He was looking forward to the best weekend ever—his sisters Lisa and Kayla had gone to stay with their cousins in Seattle until Monday night. Uncle Ben and Aunt Holly had two daughters the same ages as Tick’s sisters, and the two families swapped weekends between Deer Park and Seattle about every five months.

No girls for three whole days. Well, unless you counted his mom, which he really didn’t.

Peace and quiet. Books, junk food, and video games. It was gonna be great.

~

Mrs. Sears, the librarian, was in her usual good mood, greeting Tick with that lilting laugh of hers as the gray cleaning pad she called her hair wiggled back and forth on her head. She asked him about the pros and cons of homeschooling, the latest books he’d been reading, and how he’d been faring against his dad in the latest installment of his favorite video game, Football 4000. But every time he answered a question, he eyed the long line of computers, trying to give her a hint.

Finally she nodded toward an empty chair and said, “Well, I know why you’re here. Go on, and I’ll find you a good book before you head out. Deal?”

“Deal,” Tick responded, already moving away.

He was logged into his e-mail in no time. Just as he’d hoped, there was a letter from Sofia and one from Paul. Jackpot. Paul’s had been sent first, addressed to both Tick and Sofia, as usual. Tick opened Paul’s e-mail and began reading.

Dudes,

Okay, I'm bored. When the highlight of your day is getting an e-mail from some chick in Italy about how she hurt her pinky toe in a vicious spaghetti sauce can incident, you know it's time to change things. Where in the world is Master George? Yeah, I know we almost died and all that in the Fourth, but better that than getting up at the crack of dawn for school and then sitting around all afternoon eating cheese puffs. I can't watch TV anymore. Too boring.

Tick, how's that whole power thing of yours working out? Melted any bad guys recently? Dude, I was thinking we could present you to the world as the first human microwave oven. We'd be rich, and the ladies would swarm. Think about it. We'll split it 50-50. You do the cooking, I'll do the promoting.

Sofia, when you gonna bring us out to Italy? Don't give me any junk about money. Just ask ol' Pops to slip you a few bones to buy us airplane tickets. I'll even bring you some hot dogs. No, make that corn dogs. Yeah. Corn dogs and Italy. Now that's living.

I'm out. Any time you start mentioning corn dogs, you know it's time to end the e-mail. Later. Call us in, Master George!

Paul

Still snickering, Tick closed the e-mail and opened Sofia's, which had been sent soon after Paul's, despite the time difference.

Dudes?

Did you really start that last e-mail with "Dudes"?!?!? Promise me you'll call me a dude next time I see you. Oh, and "chick from Italy"? You're getting awfully brave, Rogers, what with an entire ocean between us. Next time we meet, you might want to wear something made of metal.

I'm kind of bored too. Things with my parents seem worse than ever. All my old friends just seem stupid now. I hate how clueless they are. They have no idea what kind of stuff is going on out there.

I wish I had a funny joke. But once Paul says something that's actually funny, I'll try harder.

Seriously, though, I do think you guys should come to Italy. I'll ask Frupey about it. Maybe this summer. Of course, I hope we're doing something as Realitants by then.

See ya.

Sofia

Tick looked at his watch and realized he should probably get home. His mom worried her head off every time he left the house these days. Deciding he'd just write his friends from home later, he logged off, checked out the book Mrs. Sears recommended, then headed out the door.

~

Just a few minutes later, he was walking down the long road toward his neighborhood, surprised that he was already sweating.

It was almost spring, but it was still too early to be *hot* in Deer Park, Washington. Since his escape from the Fourth Reality, Tick had seen his birthday come and go—he was a manly fourteen years old now. Thanksgiving, Christmas, the New Year, and most of the winter had passed as well; April was just a few days away. Tick had heard less and less from Master George in the last month or so. It gave him an uneasy feeling. He wondered if it was the calm before the storm.

He wondered about Mistress Jane, too. He'd give anything to know what had happened to her. Whether or not she was still alive. And if so, whether or not she was okay. He dreamed about her at night, reliving those terrible moments in Chu's palace when he'd sent a world of chaos at her body and attacked her with thousands of flying shards of metal.

For some reason, he'd lately had dreams where one of his sisters—sometimes Lisa, sometimes Kayla—replaced Jane and suffered the terrible onslaught instead, screaming in agony. He woke up in a sweat every time, and seeing it play out that way humanized the ordeal, made it more real. No matter what she'd done in the past, Jane was still a person, just like Lisa and Kayla.

His actions haunted him, consumed him with guilt. He wished—

Womp!

Tick stumbled to the ground, crying out as one of his elbows banged against the rock-hard dirt of the road's shoulder. He twisted onto his back, fear ripping through his body. He searched around with his eyes, tried to figure out what had happened. It'd been like a wave of hardened air had slammed against him, knocking him down with a sound like the thump of a million bass drums . . .

Womp!

He braced himself as a massive surge of energy swept across the road and past him. He expected his hair and clothes to whip in the wind, but nothing stirred. He almost felt the energy . . . *inside* his body. As if someone had

injected charges of lightning into his bloodstream.

Womp!

Tick squeezed his eyes shut. He felt a surge of heat in his chest, an intense pressure that enveloped his body, then it disappeared. Terrified, he scrambled to his feet, stumbling in a circle as he searched around him. There was nothing unusual in sight, nothing out of the ordinary.

Womp!

Tick took a step backward, wrapping his arms tightly around him, tensing as the wave of force hit again. With each surge of energy, he felt heat within his heart and veins, like a raging fever. Heat. Pressure. Squeezing. But only for an instant. Then it was gone again.

Gasping for breath, he stood as still as possible, peeking through squinted eyes, waiting for it to happen again. His mind churned, trying to imagine what it could be. In some ways it felt like the attack of Chi'karda he'd had when everything had gone crazy in Reginald Chu's research chamber.

Similar, but different.

This wasn't coming *from* him. He was feeling it coming from *somewhere else*.

A blast of panic shot through his nerves. From somewhere else . . .

Womp!

The wave hit again. Tick sprinted for home.

A Strange Guest

Lorena Higginbottom sat in the chair where she always waited for Atticus to come home from his visits with Mr. Chu at school. Her constant worrying over the boy had done strange things to her. She couldn't sleep, couldn't concentrate. She rarely laughed anymore. Sometimes—not often, but sometimes—the worry turned into utter misery, engulfing her like a horrible, *eating* cancer.

Her boy. Her one and only boy. Mixed up with the Realitants and plagued with a burden of power that no one understood yet. Something was terribly, terribly wrong with him.

She'd gone through all the usual phases. The denial, the blame, the guilt, the despair. She'd run the whole gamut of emotions over the last few months, and it had all come to a head this morning. When her husband, Edgar, had left for work, and Atticus had disappeared into his room to study, she'd sat in her room, crying, *sobbing*, a sorry sack of gloom and grief. It had taken every ounce of willpower in her body to pull her anguish back inside and hide it away. But she did, for Atticus's sake.

With a smile on her face, she'd seen him off to his appointment with his former and favorite teacher. She'd been sitting in her chair ever since, counting down the minutes until he returned. *I should've gone with him*, she thought, just as she did every single time Atticus left the house. But she couldn't. She knew that. She and Edgar had long since agreed that they couldn't exist in a constant state of terror and fear. Atticus needed time alone, time to grow, time to learn how to bear his burden. Still, he was only a child, only fourteen . . .

A rattling sound from the back of the house snapped her mind alert.

Like a shot of pure caffeine, adrenaline rushed through her body, and she jumped out of the chair before any thought had time to form. Wondering why Atticus would come home the back way—and feeling the slightest fear that it might *not* be him—she ran out of the room and down the hallway, into the kitchen, toward the door leading to the patio behind their home. The rattling noise continued. Someone was pulling at the knob, twisting it back and forth in vain because it was locked.

The trickle of fear turned into a gush; she pulled up just short of the patio door.

“Atticus?” she called out.

No answer. But whoever was out there quit trying to open the door.

“Atticus?” she repeated, louder.

Still no answer.

The door had a large window, currently covered by the drawn yellow curtain. Alarmed, she grabbed the side of the stiff material and pulled it back an inch, peeking outside.

The thing standing on her back patio wasn’t her son.

~

When his house finally came into view, Tick somehow found another burst of energy and ran faster. The loud thumps and waves of energy had stopped, but he couldn’t rest until he made sure everything was okay at home. A fresh spurt of panic squeezed his insides, and he picked up the pace yet again.

He was only two houses away when he noticed a car coming down the road from the other direction. His heart skipped a beat when he saw that it was his dad’s.

Then his heart almost stopped beating altogether when the car suddenly accelerated, the engine screaming, the tires squealing. The car swerved off the road, over the curb, and onto his front lawn. It shot across the grass until it reached the driveway, picking up speed instead of slowing down.

Tick watched in horror as the car slammed into the garage door with a thunderous crunch, then disappeared in a pile of shredded wood and dust.

~

In her head, Lorena couldn’t reconcile the thing she saw through the door’s window with any semblance of reality she knew or felt. It looked like something out of a science fiction movie—a man-shaped, shimmering ghost made out of clear liquid, its rippled surface glistening. The face had no features, but it seemed to be looking at her all the same.

For a bare instant, she actually considered unlocking and opening the door. The creature seemed so harmless, so peaceful, the water rippling like the gentle, lapping waves of a Caribbean beach. But her hand froze halfway to the latch, and a shudder of fear snapped her out of her hypnotized state. Her mind kicked into gear, reminding her that creatures made out of water were not normal, that although she’d lived a life believing only in things that were *normal*, not supernatural, seeing this creature probably changed things forever.

The sparkling water creature she saw through the window could *not* be a good thing. And most likely, it had something to do with her son.

She stepped back, her hand rising involuntarily to her mouth as the shock of her visitor hit home. Somehow she knew that something terrible was about

to happen.

The creature's watery hand reached out and grabbed the outside door handle, rattling it again. Lorena couldn't actually see the knob from her angle, and she wondered how the thing grasped objects if it was made only out of liquid. Then better sense told her that now probably wasn't the best time to figure out the physics of the situation, and that she'd better run.

But just as she took a step away from the door, the creature *melted* right in front of her, the water crashing to the pavement outside with a loud splash. It was as if a force field or an invisible membrane had been holding the thing together, and it had been abruptly taken away, leaving nothing to hold the body together. She realized she'd been holding her breath and sucked in a huge gulp of air in relief. Whatever it had been, whatever purpose . . .

Her thoughts were cut short when movement down by her feet caught her vision.

In the thin space between the door's lower edge and the short strip of wood that kept out the wind and bugs, a three-foot wide sheet of water began pouring through and onto the kitchen floor. A puddle formed in a matter of seconds, somehow deepening into a narrow pool on the flat linoleum surface.

Before Lorena could react, a horrendous crash rocked the house, the sounds of crunched metal and shredded wood thundering through the air like a sonic boom.

Even as her hands rose to cover her ears, even as the beginnings of a scream formed somewhere in the back of her throat, Lorena saw the puddle at her feet bubble and churn, swirling, coalescing into a bulbous glob, like a huge see-through water balloon about to burst.

And then the glob rose toward the ceiling, slowly reforming its human shape.

The scream finally escaped Lorena's mouth.

~

"Dad!"

Tick had faltered when the car hit the house. He was too stunned to move. Of all the things he'd expected to see when he came home, it wasn't this.

He shook himself out of his daze and ran for the mangled mess of the garage. A hissing sound came from within, the engine letting out its last, dying breath. Smoke and dust billowed out, attacking Tick's lungs with a vengeance. Coughing, he kicked at the loose metal and broken boards, digging his way in to see if his dad was okay.

"Dad!" he yelled again.

He'd just moved a big chunk of something heavy when the front door to the car popped free, a horrible metal groan screeching through the air as his dad forced it open all the way.

“Dad! What’s going—”

Tick’s voice stuck in his throat when he saw the large body of Edgar Higginbottom stumble out of the car and fall onto the garage floor.

He was covered in . . . goo. Clear goo.

~

Frozen by fear. Not able to move. Your mind screaming at your legs to run, but your legs not listening. This was why Lorena had left the Realitants long ago, hoping she’d never have to experience it again.

She stared as the mysterious, impossible thing formed, water sluicing upward from the floor, defying the law of gravity in the process. Legs, then torso, then arms, finally a head. The entire process took less than twenty seconds, but it looked unnatural, like a time-lapse film of a geological event that had taken thousands of years.

When the creature finished reforming, the watery demon stood silent for a long moment, staring at her despite the lack of eyeballs or even eye sockets.

Lorena stared back, frozen as much by stubborn disbelief as fear.

Without warning, the creature moved toward her.

Chapter

4

~

Death by Water



Tick's dad thrashed about on the garage floor, the thick layer of transparent goo that covered every part of his body bouncing and wiggling like jelly. The gel-like substance was never more than an inch thick in any one spot, but it

enveloped Edgar from head to toe. Most alarming was the clear mask covering his face.

The man obviously couldn't breathe. More than a year ago, Tick had almost seen his dad die; he felt the same horrible panic now.

"Dad!" Tick yelled again. He knew screaming wasn't going to help no matter how many times he did it. He had to *do* something.

He knelt down beside his squirming dad, who kept grabbing and tearing at the gel on his face, ripping sections away from his mouth to catch a quick breath only to have the goo be replaced almost instantly. When Tick saw his dad's hands rip at the stuff and saw the way it splashed and wavered, he realized it wasn't goo at all.

It was *water*.

Somehow, some force had captured his dad in a man-sized pool of water.

And it was killing him.

Something trembled inside Tick, fluttered, as if a raven had magically appeared inside his stomach and was trying to escape. Heat surged through his veins. Pressure built up behind his skull, pushing outward, hurting. He closed his eyes, rubbed them.

His . . . *problem*. He knew it was his problem. The stress of the situation had ignited his inexplicable reservoir of Chi'karda, causing it to erupt inside him. It was just like what had happened in Chu's palace. It was starting all over again. But he couldn't afford to lose control now.

No, he told himself. *Not this time. I have to save Dad.*

He took several long breaths and concentrated, probing his body with his thoughts, reaching out to something he didn't comprehend. Repressing it, pushing it away. Calming himself. He imagined the Chi'karda surge as a cloud of orange mist—as Mistress Jane had shown him months ago—trapped within his ribcage. Mentally, he made the cloud dissipate, weaken, flow out of him. Go somewhere else. Somewhere safe.

He had no idea what he was doing. He'd spent months trying to understand the power within him, make it a tangible thing. He'd spent months failing. But urgency won out. He felt his heart slow, felt the heat cool away, felt the pressure release.

It was gone. Tick opened his eyes, looked down, focused.

His dad's face was turning purple.

~

Lorena's screams were drowned out in a sickening gurgle as the cold wave of water crashed into her. The creature had leaped into the air and dove for her face, forming into a thick stream and slamming into her like a sudden burst from a fire hose. She shook her head, spitting and

coughing, and grabbed at her face. Instead of washing off her and falling to the floor, the liquid seemed to stick, enveloping her head and neck in a mask of water. It crept into her mouth, into her throat. She gagged, spit again. She wiped frantically at her face, but it did no good.

The terrifying situation had created a crisp sense of clarity in her mind, and an idea formed somewhere in the dark factory of her thoughts. A very bizarre idea.

She turned and bolted for the garage. With every step, she felt rivulets of water running down her torso, the creature capturing her inch by inch. She knew she wouldn't be able to move once the thing had control of her legs.

The garage. She had to reach the garage. She made it out of the kitchen and into the short hallway with coat hooks and shoe racks. The door was only a few feet away.

The water reached her knees. She felt herself slow a bit.

She lurched forward, reaching for the door that led to the garage. One arm had been taken completely over, and the other had only a second left before its fingers would be swallowed by the possessed water. The liquid encasing her arms made it harder to control her movements, but the creature seemed mostly focused on her head. She found the handle. She twisted the knob and pulled. An instant later, the wet monster had consumed her fully.

Lorena fell forward and toppled down the three stairs that descended into the garage. Ironically, the thick layer of water cushioned her fall.

~

Tick slapped at his dad's face with cupped hands, like a dog digging for a bone. Each swing caught a little pool of water and sent it flying, but more instantly sloshed back in, and the displaced splashes somehow flew back onto his dad's body like metal shavings returning to a powerful magnet. Every once in a while their combined efforts would clear just enough water for his dad to take a quick breath, but Tick knew they couldn't keep it up much longer.

The garage door that led to the inside of the house banged open.

Tick looked up and saw his mom. Fully encased in water just like his dad, she fell down the short staircase and crashed onto the floor with a wet flump.

"Mom!" Tick cried, scrambling over to her and falling on top of her. He could only hope his dad could find enough breaths to survive.

His mom clawed at the water around her nose and mouth. She kept trying to say something, but all that came out was the garbled mess you hear when someone talks to you while submerged in the swimming pool. Her eyes were open, fixed on Tick through the crystalline, shimmering layer of water. She wasn't panicked, but definitely trying to communicate something.

Tick forced himself to stay calm. Reaching forward, he placed his hands

on either side of her face. She got the message, and remained completely still. With a quick jerk, Tick slid his hands across her mouth, swiping away a huge section of water long enough for her to get one word out.

He didn't know what he'd expected, but it sure wasn't the two syllables that came out of her mouth in a gargled scream.

"Vacuum!" she yelled.

At first, confusion engulfed Tick. He thought surely his mom's mind had snapped under the pressure of being possessed by a blob of water. But then he realized it was quite the opposite. She'd been the only one to actually come up with a solution.

He turned his head to look over his shoulder, across his dad's heap of a wrecked car, and focused on the huge beast of a machine that sat next to some tools and cleaning supplies on an old wooden workbench.

The MegaVac. The thing looked like R2-D2 with a big hose.

And it could suck water out of rock.

Tick got up and ran around the front of the crashed car and over to the workbench. He reached up and grabbed the heavy, squat yellow cylinder with its thick, snaking hose attached. He dragged the vacuum toward his mom, whose face was darkening into a sick blue color.

"Mom!" he yelled. "Keep swiping at it!"

He reached her and flipped the switch on the MegaVac.

It didn't turn on.

For one agonizing second, despair crushed Tick. But then he realized the stupid thing wasn't plugged in. He scrambled for the long black cord, found its end, then crawled over to an outlet and pushed the big plug in. A heavy roar kicked in behind him. Tick scooted back over and knelt down beside his mom, grasping the end of the vacuum hose like the mouth of a deadly cobra.

The thing worked like a beauty.

He stuck the hose on his mom's mouth and watched with elation as the vacuum sucked up the water with no problem. The MegaVac had been a birthday present for his dad two years ago, and Edgar had excitedly given a demonstration to the family on how the beast could make *anything* disappear into its glorious, hard-plastic belly, be it cereal bits or gallons of floodwater. It was the closest thing to a black hole that the Higginbottoms would ever experience, he'd said.

Tick wanted to shout in victory as he realized even a supernatural creature made of liquid couldn't resist the monstrous sucking power of a MegaVac, lord of all vacuums.

He finished cleaning the water off his mom, her soggy hair and clothes the only sign she'd been encased by a water monster just moments before. Tick's

dad was only a few feet behind him, and twenty seconds later, the vacuum had sucked up his captor too.

Tick leaned back, panting as his mom and dad gasped and spit, doing their best to recover from the ordeal. He thought of Lisa and Kayla in Seattle, and had an almost overwhelming feeling of relief that they hadn't been here. The odds of Lisa—and especially little Kayla—surviving something like this . . . Tick quenched the horrible thought before images formed that might never go away.

He looked over at the body of the MegaVac, which now contained two—what exactly were those creatures?—within its belly.

A worry hit him. He didn't want to turn off the vacuum for fear the creatures would find a way to seep back down the hose. "What should we do? Do you think we killed them?"

His dad laughed, a mere sputter between heavy breaths. "I say we flush the suckers' guts down the toilet. That oughtta do it."

And that's what they did.

A Mother's Love

Sofia leaned forward against the railing of the balcony outside her bedroom, resting her elbows on the smooth stone as she looked out over her family's estate toward the east, where the sun slowly rose above the horizon. The orange glow sparkled on the waters of the Adriatic Sea in the distance. A cold breeze blew past, stirring her black hair and sending chills across her arms and down her back. Though she enjoyed the cold—it was just pleasant enough to keep her awake, keep her alert and alive—she pulled her jacket tighter.

She missed Tick and Paul. She missed Sato. Master George, Mothball, all of them. Even Rutger. Days dragged like weeks now. Their adventures in the Fourth seemed like a million years ago. She knew it was crazy to want something to happen again, considering they'd almost died, but ever since she'd returned home, returned to school, and gone through the motions of a normal life, she'd been utterly bored out of her mind.

The Realitants were her true friends now. Yes, Frupey the Butler was good to her, kind to her, ready to fulfill any command she spoke, but he was paid to do that. She had her parents, of course . . .

"Sofia?" said a soft voice.

Startled, Sofia whipped around to see her mom standing behind her—as if she'd snuck up on her. Arms crossed, her mom rubbed her shoulders through her fur coat, looking cold and miserable.

"I'm sorry if I scared you," her mom said. In Italian, of course. How Sofia missed speaking in English with Tick and Paul.

"It's okay," Sofia replied, turning back to the railing and her previous position so her mom wouldn't see the roll of her eyes. Of all the days to come up here. She couldn't remember the last time either one of her parents had stood on this balcony atop their mansion. And Sofia wasn't in the mood.

Her mom stepped up beside her and leaned forward just like Sofia, almost mockingly copying her. "I've been meaning to talk to you about something. Ever since you . . . came back. Ever since I realized how close we came to losing you."

Not this, Sofia thought. *Please, not this*. "Mom, I'm not quitting the Realitants. I don't care what you say. It's too important."

Her mom stiffened, then relaxed. "I don't care for that tone, young lady.

I'm your *mother*."

Sofia was shocked but quickly tried to hide it. Her mom never showed the slightest hint of parenting or discipline. Almost not knowing how to respond, Sofia muttered an apology.

"In any case," her mom said, "that's not what this is about. Your father and I recognize that this . . . Realitant thing is something you will do, either with our consent or without it. Which is why I want to make sure you understand something. I think it will show you how much we care about you, despite what you may think."

Sofia couldn't help but be intrigued. It'd been years since they'd had such a conversation. "What is it?" She didn't look at her mom, but kept her eyes on the distant, brightening horizon.

"Well," her mom started, then hesitated. "It's hard to know how to say it, so please hear me out. Your father and I never intended for you to be born. I mean, we'd made a decision early on to never have children. We never meant to have you."

Sofia almost choked on the lump that blossomed in her throat. "*That's* what you came up here to tell me?"

"Now, now, I told you to hear me out," her mom quickly responded, patting Sofia's arm. "Listen to me—we never intended to have you or any child, but you came anyway. Unexpectedly. And even though it was against all of our plans, even though it hindered your father's career and made it difficult for us to travel and accomplish the goals we'd set out before getting married . . . Well, I think you can see that despite all that, we accepted it and raised you and have always provided you with whatever you needed. And, above all else, we made sure to love you."

Sofia shifted her hands so she could grip the edge of the railing, squeezing hard to prevent her arms from shaking. Something terrible formed in her chest, something bulging and hurtful and full of bad things. It seemed to reach through her heart, through her throat, grabbing her mind and soul, begging her to cry. That was it. Every piece of her wanted to bawl her eyes out, sob until she felt nothing.

But she refused. She didn't understand how she did it, but she refused to let the tears come. There was no way she would let her mom see such a thing and misinterpret it, think that she'd finally bonded with her only child. Mistake her tears for love.

Concentrating with all her might, Sofia forced the heavy feeling away and took control of her emotions. Finally, she relaxed her hands.

"Well?" her mom said after a long few seconds. "Do you understand? Is everything okay now? Better?"

"Yes," Sofia said, pushing the word out of her mouth, praying it was over

and her mom would walk away.

“That’s wonderful.” She patted Sofia’s arm again. “You know I love you, right?”

“Yes, Mom.”

“And you love me?”

“Yes, Mom.” That’s all Sofia could manage. Just those two words. She clung to them, hoped they’d be enough to end this conversation.

“And your father?”

“Yes, Mom.”

“Great. I’m so glad we had this talk. Aren’t you?”

“Yes, Mom.”

“Okay, then. Your father and I are going away for a few days. We’ll be leaving tonight. Bye, now.”

And with that, she turned and walked away.

Sofia thought about the fact that they hadn’t even hugged. She knew it should bother her as much as everything else, but it didn’t. Sadly, it didn’t bother her at all.

When she was absolutely sure her mom wasn’t coming back, Sofia finally gave up the internal battle and decided to let the tears flow.

But nothing came.

~

An hour passed. Maybe more. She couldn’t really tell. She felt like she was in a haze, numb to the world. Eventually the cold got to her, and she went inside, though in some ways, the house felt chillier.

For awhile she wandered the large house, completely ignoring the paintings and vases and tapestries and wood paneling and plush carpet that marked it as a mansion. She wandered, dreading her afternoon lessons with Lolita the private tutor. Sofia longed for the weekend, for two full days of nothing and no one—even though she knew she’d spend it sulking and checking the computer every two minutes for e-mails from Tick or Paul.

She entered the massive kitchen, all marble tile and shiny silver appliances, hoping a snack from the fridge would jump-start her from the doldrums. Frupey—his blond hair slicked back as usual—and the head cook were there, planning meals for the few days Sofia’s parents would be gone. When that was the case—which was often—Frupey and the cook schemed to make dinner a little more tasty for Sofia, a little less healthy. Sometimes they even spoiled her with hot dogs, a secret she’d never dare tell her friends back in America.

“Sofia,” Frupey said when he noticed her. “I was just going to come for you. I’ve received word that you have a friend coming within the hour.”

Sofia felt a tinge of excitement, and the dull blahs inside her vanished. A friend? Her immediate thought was it had to be a Realitant. Maybe Mothball or Rutger.

“Really?” she asked, trying not to sound too eager. “Who is it? And what do you mean you *received word*?”

“Well, it’s rather strange.” Frupey stood straight, arms clasped behind his back. Ever the butler. “A metal tube came flying through a window. It thoroughly shattered the glass and required quite the cleanup. Based on your stories of, well, you know, your new friends, I thought it must be from the adventurous science people.”

Sofia’s heart soared. It *was* them. She couldn’t wait to give Master George a hard time about his less-than-apt abilities at placing his message tubes when winking them.

“What did it say?” she asked. “Where is it?”

Frupey bowed and pulled a small piece of white cardstock from his jacket pocket and handed it over to her.

She snatched it out of his hands with a quickly murmured thank you and read it:

Sofia, we’ll be there straightaway to pick you up. Within the hour.
It’s most urgent!

MG

Unable to hide a grin, and now thrilled that her parents were leaving, she ran from the kitchen without another word to Frupey so she could pack a few things for her trip.

~

Master George came alone.

Sofia had been standing on the large brick porch for thirty minutes, the strap of her bag digging into her shoulder, staring down the long paved drive, waiting anxiously. When she spotted the old man shuffling along with an almost comical, hurried gait, she sprinted out to meet him.

“Why didn’t you just have me go to the usual cemetery?” she asked when she reached his side.

Master George stopped walking, bent over and put his hands on his knees to catch a few deep breaths.

“I don’t mean to wink you back to headquarters for now,” he finally responded. “Believe it or not, I’ve left Sally in charge of the Barrier Wands back at headquarters. I came to pick you up personally so we could travel together to our next location.”

“Which is?” Sofia urged. She could hardly stand the

anticipation; the desire to get away from her large and dreary house was almost overwhelming.

Master George stood straight again, fixing his gaze on her. His ruddy face framed eyes full of concern. “Sofia, I don’t quite know how to say it. We’ve received an . . . invitation. A very odd one, at that.”

“Really? From who? For what?”

“Let’s just say it frightens me greatly. Come on. We need to make our way back to the cemetery so we can wink to Florida and pick up Paul. I’ll explain along the way.” He turned and started down the drive.

Sofia, baffled but full of excitement, followed.

Finger on the Pulse

Tick suspected he'd probably think the whole incident hilarious a few years down the road. They'd killed two monstrous water creatures with a vacuum cleaner and a dozen toilet flushes. But that night, lying in his bed, all he could think about as he stared at the dark ceiling was how close it had been. What it was like to see his mom's face behind that deadly mask of water and his dad's big body thrash around on the floor. What it was like to see his parents—both of them—almost die.

It hurt. It haunted. And he couldn't get the images out of his mind. People always used the phrase "too close for comfort," and after all he'd been through, and more than ever tonight, he understood what that meant on a very deep level. Especially when he considered how lucky they were Lisa and Kayla had gone away for the weekend. He knew there'd be no sleep for him tonight. Even if there were, it'd be full of nightmares.

Sighing, he rolled over onto his side and looked at the closet. The door was shut. He hadn't consciously thought about it before, but he was pretty sure that door had been closed every night since the Gnat Rat had shown up and attacked him. Compared to the things happening to him now, that incident almost seemed funny. Almost silly.

Compared to his . . . problem.

That was the word he'd started using when referring to whatever was wrong with him. Somehow, for some reason, he had a natural surplus—an *extreme* surplus—of Chi'karda, that quiet force that explains and controls the world of quantum physics and therefore everything in the universe. The fact that Mistress Jane had pulled it out of him, shown it to him, burned the visual in his mind forever, only made it more terrifying.

He had enough Chi'karda inside him to power a Barrier Wand. He had enough to disintegrate a spaceship-sized weapon of metal. Enough to destroy one of the largest buildings in all of the Realities. He'd said it before, and he felt it now, for the millionth time.

He was a freak. A dangerous, out-of-control freak.

But then he felt the slightest glimmer of hope, almost like a visible light in his shadowed room of nighttime. In the garage, when he had started to lose control, he'd been able to pull back, make it stop. The more he thought about it, the better he felt.

He'd stopped. He'd controlled the power. That was a huge thing. The realization hadn't really hit him until now—he'd been too preoccupied with the aftermath of the attack by the water creatures—but the Chi'karda had almost exploded within him, and he'd made it go away!

Tick sat up in bed, wrapping his arms around his knees. He had to tell Sofia and Paul. And Master George, of course. He looked over at the digital clock on his desk and read the time—just a few minutes before midnight. No way he could wait until morning.

Swinging his legs off the bed, he stood up and headed for the computer downstairs.

~

The house was dark and silent, the faint swooshing of the refrigerator the only sound. Tick knew his odds of making it downstairs without his dad hearing him were tiny, but he tried all the same, creeping along on his tiptoes, hitting all the quiet spots in the floor and on the stairs he'd scouted out long ago. If Dad did come down, surely he'd understand why Tick wanted so urgently to tell his friends about what had happened. And to make sure nothing had attacked them.

Once in his e-mail program, and after feeling a little disappointed that he had no messages waiting for him, he created a new one for Paul and Sofia. He started typing.

Hey guys,

I don't even know where to start. Crazy day. Horrible day. Worst day since that stuff in the Fourth. Guess I'll just tell it how it went.

It started while I was walking home from school after my normal visit with Mr. Chu. (Sofia, I know you hate him, but he's not the same guy as Reginald. He was being controlled when he kidnapped us. Get over it!)

Anyway, I got hit by this weird feeling, like a huge electrical charge, like some kind of invisible power, hitting me in waves. Then things got worse.

Tick went on to tell them about the run home, finding his parents under attack by the water creatures, fighting the things, killing them with the vacuum. Flushing them down the toilet.

He winced when he typed that part, already imagining the response from Sofia. It was like handing your enemy a thousand rounds of ammo so they could shoot you with more ease. And glee. She'd have a field day with that stuff.

He paused for a moment, wishing he could make the fight sound tougher, scarier. Like it had been in real life. In an e-mail, it sounded completely stupid. Might as well write, *Hey guys, you should've seen how I wielded that vacuum cleaner! I was invincible!*

Groaning, he continued typing.

Well, it was a lot worse than it sounds. Trust me. I just wish I knew where they came from, what they were, and who sent them. And what those weird waves of power I felt were. Has anything happened to you guys? We better be extra careful, really be on the lookout.

I think we should talk again on the Internet phone-thingy Sofia's butler helped us all set up. Since tomorrow is Saturday, what about in the morning (for me)—9:00? Let me know.

Tick
Realitant First Class

Tick always signed his e-mails that way, purely for one reason: it bugged the heck out of Sofia. He clicked send, then sat back and folded his arms, watching the screen as it confirmed the message had been sent on its way.

His thoughts wandered. He saw his mom, encased in water, writhing on the floor. His dad's face growing purple. Remembered the terror of those few moments in the garage, before they were safe. He felt as if his heart had turned to lead.

What if it happened again? Almost certainly, it would. Something like it. Or worse.

A yawn leaked out, almost surprising him, and he snapped out of his stupor. Stretching his arms high above his head, he stood up from the chair, then leaned forward to shut down the computer. Once finished, he turned to head up for bed, already dreading the dreams that might await him.

Womp.

Tick sucked in a breath, reaching out to grab the back of the desk chair. The burst of energy had swept across him, throwing off his balance. Once he was sure he was stable and could stand, he looked around him, searching his surroundings. All he could see were shadows draped across more shadows, a faint light coming through the windows, another small glow from a nightlight down the hall. But the house was mostly dark, and everything seemed a great hiding spot for a monster ready to spring for him.

Womp.

Again. This time he realized how much *smaller* the energy wave was than those that had hit him earlier that afternoon on the road home from school. It

had only been remembering that experience that sent terror pumping his heart when he'd felt the burst of energy this time. He calmed, just a little.

Womp.

Definitely smaller. Weaker. Whatever the word was. Barely there, almost a vibration. A sound that was not quite a sound.

Womp.

A pulse. That described it better than anything else. He was feeling a pulse of energy, sweeping through the air, through his skin, rattling his insides like a tuning fork. He could sense its source, just like he'd be able to tell from which direction he heard a radio or piano playing.

Womp . . . womp . . . womp . . .

Again and again.

It was coming from the basement.

Beneath

Tick's racing heart eased when he realized the pulse was far less powerful this time, felt less dangerous. But having it come from the basement—the unfinished, cement-floored, dark and cold basement? That was way worse than a closet.

He had to investigate. He had no choice on the matter. He was a Realitant, and he'd brought this danger—if it *was* a danger, and it didn't take a genius to jump to that conclusion—to his family, to his home. Responsibility for that hung like a huge sack of rocks, draped with ropes across his back. Despite what he'd experienced so far with the mysterious power within him, despite what he'd done to Chu's palace and the weapon called Dark Infinity, despite what he'd done to—

He cut off the thought. The point was, he didn't *feel* powerful. Not in the least. Having a gun does you no good if it's missing the trigger.

Womp . . . womp . . . womp . . .

But none of that mattered. Something weird pulsed in his basement, and he was going down there to figure out what.

He realized his hands were clasped tightly into fists. If he'd had long nails, his palms would be bleeding like geysers. He forced himself to relax, flexing his fingers and taking several deep breaths. Then he headed out of the room, down the hall, toward the door to the basement.

He hesitated in front of it, as though the black shadows of the hallway clung to him like a gluey mass. He stared at the knob, a stub of gold that was the only spot of color in the darkness. The throbs of the unseen force continued, a small vibration in his skull.

He opened the door and stepped through it onto the landing of the stairway that led below. If he'd thought it had been dark before, the bottom of the stairs was a lightless abyss. He fumbled for the switch, found it and turned on the light, banishing the shadows. Before him lay the wooden staircase, surrounded with bare white walls with a cement floor at the bottom. He couldn't see anything else yet.

Womp . . . womp . . . womp . . .

The pulse strengthened slightly, calling to him from the basement. He had the sudden and terrifying thought that maybe he'd been hypnotized, that he was acting irrationally. He stopped before taking the first step. Was he nuts

for even thinking about going down there? The first time he'd felt this energy pulse, something terrible had happened.

But he had to do it. He had to. He wondered if he should get his dad, but pushed the thought away. The hairs of his arms standing on end, he started down the stairs. Even treading lightly, each footfall still made a deadened thump. He wished the steps had carpet. He descended further, running his right hand along the wall, making a soft scraping sound, almost a swish.

Womp . . . womp . . . womp . . .

He reached the bottom, then darted toward the long string that fell from the ceiling, attached to a single light bulb. He pulled the string, waiting in dread to see what the light would reveal. When the bulb clicked on and the room brightened, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. The single room in the half-basement was maybe twenty feet wide, and Tick couldn't see anything out of the ordinary.

The room was cluttered with boxes, bags, plastic tubs full of old clothes, a horizontal pole holding up dusty coats on hangers, a rack of shoes which hadn't been worn in years, a pile of Christmas decorations that hadn't quite been put away yet. He wondered if his mom even knew her wonderful and faithful husband had neglected that duty for months now.

But the pulsing continued, stronger now, though nothing like what he'd felt on the street. Still, it was powerful enough that the energy surrounded him, throbbing, and he couldn't tell from which direction it came.

Womp . . . womp . . . womp . . .

He slowly turned in a circle, scanning every inch of the room with his eyes. Boxes, tubs, junk. Nothing else.

The pulse stopped. Cut off.

It didn't slow, didn't fade. It stopped, abruptly. A powerful silence filled the air. Tick's skin tingled, as if it had grown used to the almost comforting vibrations of the energy waves and wanted them back. He heard his own breathing as he continued to turn, and for some reason that crept him out. He felt stuck in one of those nightmares where you *know* you're dreaming, but you can't wake up.

His instincts came to life, telling him to get out of there. He—

“Atticus. Higginbottom.”

Tick turned sharply toward the sound, stumbling backward until he hit the stairs. His knees buckled, and he sat down on the third step. He sucked in a breath, feeling as if something had been shoved down his throat, clogging it. The barely female voice that had spoken his name had been monstrous. Dry. Raspy. Painful. As if every syllable sent waves of flame through its owner's body. And it was slightly . . . muffled.

He couldn't see anyone in the basement. He swept his head back and forth

but saw nothing. No one. His hands gripped the lip of the step beneath his legs.

“Two words,” said the horrible voice. “A name. How different my life would be if I’d never heard them uttered.”

Tick concentrated on a certain spot, a dark shadow behind a pile of boxes he hadn’t noticed before. Probably another project his dad should have organized and put away months ago. But there was enough room back there for someone to stand. To hide.

“Who’s there?” Tick asked, relieved his voice came out with no cracks. Relieved he could talk at all.

“An old friend,” came the reply, the harsh voice softening to a bare whisper, like the crackling of dead leaves in the distance. “Someone who wanted to *be* your friend.”

Tick knew his mouth was open. He knew his eyes were wide, full of terror. Every inch of him screamed that he should run. He should book it up the stairs and yell for his parents to call the police.

It was her. It was *her*.

He couldn’t move his eyes away from the tall length of shadow. Something moved in the darkness. A human figure formed, then stepped into the light. A robe of dull yellow covered every inch of her body, the hood pulled up and over her head, almost hiding the face.

Except there was no face. At least, not a human face. The figure wore a red mask of metal, its features pulled into a smile that somehow looked more frightening than a scowl of anger.

“Mistress Jane,” Tick whispered, his senses having turned numb. He knew it was her before she nodded ever so slightly to confirm what he’d said. So he hadn’t killed her after all.

But that mask. And her voice. What *had* he done to her?

He waited for her to speak, to explain why she’d come. But she only stood there, completely still, her hands hidden within the folds of her robe. The red mask was impossibly shiny, almost as if it were molten metal. Liquid. Wet.

One of the eyebrows twitched, moving half an inch up then back down again. As he stared, the smile on the mask slowly melted into a frown, into a grimace. The eyebrows slanted with unspoken rage.

How did she do that? Tick could feel blood rushing in his temples, in his neck. What was she going to do to him?

Still, she said nothing. She didn’t move.

Tick couldn’t take the silence anymore. “Jane . . . Mistress Jane . . .” He was stuttering, searching for words. If his hands hadn’t been firmly holding onto the stair beneath him, they’d have been trembling uncontrollably. “I

promise I didn't mean to do whatever I did to you. I lost control—I don't even know what I lost control of. My mind wasn't working right. I don't know what happened."

He paused, hoping for a change on that mask. If anything, it looked angrier.

"I'm sorry," he continued. "I could tell by the way you . . . screamed, that, um . . ." He looked down at the floor. "I know I hurt you. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to."

When he lifted his eyes again, he almost cried out. She was three steps closer to him, the mask as scary as ever, the rage evident on the sparkling, deep red surface.

"I'm sorry," he said again, barely getting it out.

"Stop talking," Jane said, her raspy voice muffled but strong, creating a dry whisper of an echo in the room. "Don't say another word until I give you permission. Do you understand?"

"Ye—" Tick stopped himself. He nodded.

Mistress Jane stood still, her robe unruffled. She reminded Tick of a statue. A very angry statue with a red face. "I don't want to hear your apologies. Your excuses. Don't insult my pain by refusing to take responsibility for your actions. You know the nature of Chi'karda. You know the nature of your heart. You did this to me by your own choice. It couldn't have happened against your will. Your conscious . . . current . . . evident will." She spat out the last few syllables.

Tick felt awful. It wasn't so much the words she'd used. He felt the meaning of them more in the tone of her voice. Worse, he felt the truth of it. Shame and guilt blossomed like diseased flowers in his lungs, making it hard to breathe.

"I—" he began.

"I DIDN'T ASK YOU TO SPEAK!" she screamed, her body shaking beneath the robe, the first movement Tick had seen in several minutes. Terror pinched Tick's nerves.

Then, as if it came from another world, one in which he used to live but could barely remember, he heard footsteps upstairs. Urgent footsteps. The basement door opened above them.

No! he thought, even as he turned to look up the stairs, ready to tell his parents to run.

But when he saw who stood in the doorway, confusion and surprise almost burned away his fear. He blinked, forcing himself to swallow.

It was Sofia.

Quite the Crowd

Shocked to see her, Tick stood up and fully turned around, facing the stairs, his eyes riveted on one of his best friends. He could almost forget he had the most dangerous woman in the Realities standing behind him.

“Sofia?” he asked, his voice cracking.

“Is she down there?” she responded in a whisper, gesturing with a nod.

Tick was completely baffled. “How do you . . .” He didn’t know how to finish or what to ask first. What was going on?

“Is *she* down there?” Sofia repeated, her emphasis leaving no doubt who she meant.

Tick jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. “Yes!” he snapped in a loud rasp. “She’s standing right behind me!”

“Bring them down,” Mistress Jane said. “They’re late.”

Tick wilted, hoping against hope that maybe the woman would have gone away when she realized they had company. How had she gotten to Tick’s house in the first place? Only inanimate objects should be winkable to his house and its relatively low amounts of Chi’karda. And what happened to that pulsing thing? He felt completely unsettled, like the old dream where he walked into class at school dressed in nothing but his underwear.

At the top of the stairs, Sofia leaned back out the door and seemed to be talking to someone. Then she popped back in and started down the steps, each footstep a thump. To Tick’s complete surprise, others followed her.

Master George, dressed in his fine, dark suit, red-faced and dry-skinned as usual, as if he’d been standing in a windy desert for hours. Behind him came Paul, an inexplicable grin on his face. Next was Tick’s dad, then Tick’s mom, both of them looking bleary-eyed and disheveled as if they’d just been awakened.

Tick could only stare, his mind trying to convince himself he must be dreaming. When Sofia reached the bottom step, he absently moved aside and let her pass, then Master George and Paul, both of whom patted him on the shoulder as they walked by. No one said a word, and it was impossible to read anything from the look in their eyes. There was fear there, but only a little.

His dad stopped beside him, then his mom. They both put their arms around him as Tick turned toward the middle of the basement. Everyone stood in a semicircle, facing Mistress Jane in her yellow robe and red mask,

which was now empty of expression, neither angry nor happy. For what seemed like the hundredth time, Tick felt relief that his sisters had gone to Seattle for the weekend.

The whole situation was just too bizarre, and he finally found his voice.

“What’s going on here?” he asked to no one in particular. He felt like he was on one of those hidden-camera TV shows where they play pranks on people. He half-expected a cameraman to step out of the shadows any second.

“Ask her,” Sofia said almost viciously as she pointed at Jane.

“Yes, my good friend,” Master George added. “Ask our host.”

Tick looked at Jane, surprised. She’d *arranged* this?

Jane didn’t move as silence settled in the room, anticipation palpable in the air. Tick stared at the shiny surface of her red mask, trying to understand what was happening. He stood huddled with his parents in his basement, next to his two best friends and the leader of the Realitants, staring at a woman in a robe and mask, who could probably kill them all without breaking a sweat.

Time stretched as they waited for Jane to speak, to give an explanation. Tick wanted to scream, wanted to—

“I sent my waterkelts as a little opening exercise to our meeting,” Jane finally said, her voice scratchy but calm and cool. “Though I’m very disappointed they didn’t kill at least *one* of your parents, Atticus.”

Tick said nothing, fighting the urge to run at her.

“Anyway,” Jane said, “you’re probably wondering why I’ve brought you all here.”

No one replied, but Tick’s thoughts ran wild. She’d brought them all to his *basement*?

The face of Jane’s mask remained expressionless. “I knew Atticus would have the hardest time getting permission to leave due to his . . . unusual gift. That’s why we’re here. That’s why I sent you the note this morning, George. I’m glad to see you’re still capable of performing simple tasks. Though I wanted the boy Sato here as well.”

Tick glanced at Master George, who was visibly struggling to contain his contempt for this woman. “The boy is on a mission at the moment,” the old man spurted, unable to sound composed. “Be glad we came at all. I’ll have you speak your mind and be done with it. Remember, you’ve given your word this will be a diplomatic meeting. A peaceful meeting.”

Jane’s mask grinned, though the lips never parted. “Frightened, George? Scared of what your old pupil may do? You can thank the boy”—she nodded at Tick—“for making your fears relevant. You should definitely *be* afraid.”

“What is this nonsense?” Master George demanded.

“How did you get here?” Jane asked him.

Master George shifted on his feet. “What do you mean?”

Jane’s smile vanished almost instantly, the mask frowning. “George, don’t make me repeat questions a child could understand. How did you *get* here?”

“What does it matter? I fetched Paul and Sofia, then we winked to the forest a mile or so from here and walked the rest of the way. *Why?*”

“The forest?” Jane repeated. “Ah, yes, the forest. I sensed a pool of Chi’karda there. Perhaps an old cemetery, its wooden grave markers long turned to dust. I hope you walked briskly—good exercise I’m sure. Looks like you need it.”

“What is your *point?*” Master George snapped.

For the first time, Jane pulled her hands from out of the folds of the robe where she’d had them hidden. No one in the room could hold back a small gasp at the sight of them, especially Tick. He felt his mom’s arm tighten around his shoulders.

Jane’s hands were hideously red and flaky, covered with scars. Small shards and slivers of golden metal seemed fused to her skin. She folded her fingers together delicately, then rested her hands on her midsection. When Tick finally tore his eyes away from the terrible sight and looked at her face, he saw a horrific grimace of pain. Intense, aching pain. But then it was gone, replaced once again by the expressionless mask.

Jane must have noticed Tick’s own look of horror. “See something disturbing, Atticus? What, you don’t like my hands? You don’t think they’re pretty? Wouldn’t like to hold them, go for a stroll?”

Tick felt as though his insides were melting. He’d spent the last few months wondering what had happened to her, wondering if she was dead. He’d been consumed by guilt for what he’d done. Seeing Jane’s hands for himself now, he made the only logical conclusion he could. She wore the robe and mask because the rest of her body looked the same as her ruined hands.

He wanted to run. He wanted to sprint up those stairs and run away forever.

Jane seemed to sense his thoughts. “No, Atticus. For what you’ve done to me, you will be by my side. You’ll make restitution, and you’ll help me accomplish what I set out so long ago to do. That’s the only way I’ll forgive you.”

Tick felt his mom tense again, and he couldn’t stop her before she spoke.

“Now listen to me, Jane,” she said. “My son isn’t responsible for what happened to you any more than my left foot is. We’ve heard every detail of that day a million times over. He can’t control what’s inside him. You tried to *kill* him. What did you expect!”

Jane’s mask moved fiercely to rage. “I did *not* try to kill him! He knew I was trying to release his Chi’karda. I wanted to stop Chu from driving every

last person in the Realities insane. I told him that—he knew it!”

“That’s a load of horse poop!” Tick’s dad suddenly yelled, making Tick jump.

“You’re an adult, Jane,” his mom continued, surprisingly calm and collected. “You should’ve known what his reaction would be. Everything that happened to you was your own fault. You—”

“*Shut up!*” Jane screamed, her whole body trembling from the effort, the mask full of hate and anger.

Tick felt his mom and dad take a step backward. He went with them. The other Realitants did the same. A storm of emotions raced through Tick. He wanted to cheer for his dad yelling at Jane; he loved his mom more than at any other moment in his life for standing up for him, for acting so brave and leader-like. And he hated Jane. Hated her.

But laced through all the other emotions was fear. Pure, unsettling fear. Something terrible was going to happen. He knew it. And deep down within him, he felt the stirrings of his power, massing like a storm. Scared of what might happen, he forced the power away as he’d done earlier in the garage. If only he could learn how to use it . . .

After a long moment, the echo of Jane’s command faded away, and silence clouded the room. When she spoke again, it was very quiet. “You’ll all be coming with me. I want you to witness something.”

“Coming with—?” Master George began, but when Jane’s arm shot out and one of her hideous fingers pointed at his face, he shut his mouth.

Jane lowered her arm and folded her hands once again. “I remember in old movies, how the villain always said, through mad laughter, that he had a diabolical plan. As if anyone actually *used* such a word as diabolical.”

She stepped forward, the face of her mask smoothing back to normalcy, though Tick didn’t feel the tension in the room lessen, not one bit.

“But,” she continued, her voice icy and soft, “it’s the only word I can think of for what I have planned. My plan is, indeed, diabolical. For you, Edgar, slow-witted as you seem to be, that means terrible, horrible, awful, treacherous, and unspeakably nasty. Understand?” Her eyebrows arched.

Tick wanted to punch her for being so cruel to his dad, but did nothing. Next to him, his dad merely nodded. Tick hoped it was out of fear and not shame or embarrassment at her accusation.

“Yes,” Jane said, with a slow smile. “A diabolical plan. And every one of you is going to witness it.”

Dead Ticks Everywhere

This was the eighth time Sato'd seen it now. A tomb for Tick.

Every place was unique. The wording was a little different every time, and the dates varied, but they all meant the same thing.

Tick's Alterants were dead. All of them, by the looks of it.

Sato hoped this latest discovery would finally be enough to satisfy George and let him end gallivanting all across the Realities. Tick was alive in Reality Prime, but Sato had personally witnessed his friend's grave in eight of the remaining twelve. Did George really need him to go through with making sure the other four were the same? Knowing George, Sato thought with a sigh, probably yes. Just to make sure.

Sato stood in a vast field in the Fifth Reality, dawn still a couple of hours away. He'd woken up in the middle of the night back at newly repaired Realitant headquarters in the Bermuda Triangle—Sato still missed going for walks in the Grand Canyon—and hadn't been able to go back to sleep.

So he'd made Rutger roll his round body out of bed and wink him here to the Fifth Reality. He wanted to get the trip over with and be done. He was looking forward to getting back earlier than usual and having plenty of time to rest and relax. Maybe play cards with Mothball and Sally, though those two turned vicious when the stakes got high. Especially if the pot reached a whole bag of M&Ms.

The air had winter's bite of cold—the place was far in the north with a high altitude—but he'd worn his thick coat and gloves, so he actually felt great, refreshed and full of life. Beaming his big flashlight this way and that, he'd slowly made his way across the huge cemetery, checking each and every tombstone.

It was easy to tell this was Mothball's world. Each grave was a good couple of feet longer and wider than he was used to, and the markers had an almost disturbingly humorous edge to them: "Plank, please don't come back and haunt us—you have stinky feet." "Toolbelt, you were a wonder in life, despite your gigantic nose." "Snowdrift, who died with a smile on her face, even after falling off that cliff."

The strangeness didn't completely surprise him, knowing Mothball. She had a very unusual sense of humor. But there was just something wrong about giggling out loud like a little kid, over and over, in the middle of a dark

graveyard.

He finally found Tick's marker after almost two hours of searching. Standing before it, he focused his flashlight on the large, rounded tombstone:

Here lies Atticus Higginbottom

Dead at the sad age of seven.

**Atticus, you had more gas than
any normal child should,**

but we still miss you terribly.

Rest in peace, our sweet, sweet son.

Sato clicked off the flashlight and stood in the dark for several minutes, surprisingly touched by the eulogy. It was impossible to separate these Alterants from the people you knew—hard not to imagine that lying beneath you was the person you'd grown to care for. In many ways, it was the same person. Although he didn't quite understand how it worked yet, this boy who'd died of who-knew-what was just Tick along a different path. He'd probably been similar in personality, looked the same though much taller, had the same drive to help others—just like Tick had saved Sato's life twice now.

And even though Sato had been grumpy with George more than once about this mission, in some ways it had helped him appreciate the fact that his friends—who were few in number—were alive and well, not dead like this poor kid. But it also made him sad, imagining another version of Tick dying so young. George said they didn't quite know why these major Realities still followed the same general pedigrees and lineages despite having such vastly different histories, but there had to be a big reason for it.

It worked geographically, too. Tick's Alterants had all been born in the same place and buried in the same vicinity. And, as far as Sato knew, Tick's parents were always named Edgar and Lorena and he always had two sisters, Lisa and Kayla. Strange stuff. Interesting how it all worked. Lately George thought he was on the verge of a breakthrough.

It had something to do with soulkens, a phenomenon the old man was trying desperately to figure out. He rarely talked about it, claiming all his information would get jumbled up and confused if he tried to explain it. Once he could lay it before them piece by piece, in a rational and comprehensible discussion, he'd immediately gather the Realitants to do so—something he'd been promising for months.

Soulkens. All Sato knew was that it had something to do with the electricity that existed within the human body. Actual and real electricity. Words like *signals* and *impulses* and *imprints* were thrown around, but never enough at once to make any sense of it. The Realitants would just have to be patient and wait for George to get it all together inside his thick skull.

But Sato had learned some things on his own, and as he stood in the

darkness, enjoying the cool air, the quiet, the peace he always felt in a cemetery, he thought about one of them. Electricity was an essential physical element in making the heart pump. It seemed impossible that the human body could create electricity, but it was true. And the fact that the heart—the most important organ and the symbol of so many things in life—depended so greatly on it meant . . .

Well, he didn't know what it meant. But it had something to do with soulkens, and something to do with his mission to find dead Alterants of Tick. Except every time Sato tried to put the pieces together, it got jumbled and confusing. No wonder George was so insistent that he couldn't talk about it yet.

Sato felt a headache coming on. He reached into his pocket and pushed the little button that signaled he was ready to wink back to HQ.

A nice, long morning nap. That's exactly what he needed. Folding his arms and shivering at the cold that had seeped through his thick coat and chilled his skin, he waited for Rutger to bring him home.

A minute passed, then two. To his surprise, two people appeared in front of him—one short and fat, the other tall and skinny. He didn't need to shine the light on them to know who they were, but he did anyway.

Rutger threw up one of his pudgy arms to block the brightness. He held a Barrier Wand in the other. "Point that back at your feet, Sato! I'd like my eyes to last another decade or two!"

Sato didn't budge, hoping they couldn't see the big smile that flashed across his face.

Mothball, towering over her best friend and standing like a pile of sticks thrown together at the last minute with glue and draped with loose-fitting clothes, merely squinted. "Master Sato, best be puttin' down your torch there. 'Less you're wantin' to have a nice-sized pair of fists box them sad little ears of yours."

Sato did as she said, snapping back to the reality of the situation as he did so. Why had they come? Something had to be wrong. A trickle of panic wiped his grin completely away.

"Wait," he said. "What are you guys doing here? What happened?"

Rutger, temporarily blinded by Sato's trick with the flashlight, was making his way forward, waddling along on his short legs and reaching out with his free hand to make sure he didn't bump into anything. "Calm down, you worry-wart. Everything's fine."

Mothball's eyes seemed to have already adjusted. She made it to Sato before Rutger was even halfway there. "The wee man is right, Master Sato. No need for your worries. Just come to give ya a bit of a break, we 'ave.

Thought we'd come and visit me mum and dad. Let ya see what real nice folks are like here in the Fifth."

Sato felt a strong surge of relief, which made him worry that maybe he was worrying too much. *Oh shut up*, he told himself. "Serious? We're going to see your parents?" He was surprised at how much the idea lifted him.

"Right ya are," Mothball replied. "'Long as we can get our guide here to quit stumbling about like an eyeless toad. Come on, Rutger, set your dials and switches and get on with it."

Rutger grumbled something too quiet to make out, then held the Barrier Wand up, concentrating. "A light, please?"

Sato shined the flashlight on the Wand, then asked, "Where do they live? Around here?"

"No, grumpy cheeks," Rutger responded as he turned a dial or two, his tongue caught between his lips. "We're going to wink to another cemetery near them. It's a good ten thousand miles from here, so hold your hats."

"I'm not wearin' a ruddy hat," Mothball said.

"It's an *expression*," Rutger huffed. "Alright, we're ready to go, and I'm locked onto all of our nanolocators. Here we go."

Without another warning, Rutger pushed the button on top of the Wand. Sato heard the metallic click and felt the familiar tingle on his neck, and then everything changed.

It was daytime, the sun above almost blinding. Sato shielded his eyes, and at first he thought that what he saw in front of him was a trick of the light on his mind. But then it came into better focus, and he had no doubt.

Several people were trying to kill each other with swords.

And they were dressed like clowns.

Ribbons of Orange

Tick couldn't believe how quiet Paul and Sofia had been since coming down the stairs—especially Sofia. The girl could never keep her mouth shut. And Paul—he had to be terrified to stay so silent. And his face showed it. Tick thought about how many weeks he'd been dying to see these guys, and now that they were here, he'd give anything to send them safely away.

“What do you mean?” Master George asked Jane after a long period of silence, Jane seemingly content to let her pronouncement sink in. “What plan are you talking about, and why would you want us to witness it?”

Tick had been trying to look at the floor, avoiding the menacing mask on Jane's face. But his eyes kept drawing back to it, fascinated at its almost magical ability to change expressions. Upon Master George's question, it melted into compassion, almost sadness.

“You have always known my wishes,” she said in a flat voice, as if beginning a long lecture. “My ways and means may have changed—certainly my abilities have—but I've never wavered from my lifetime mission, George. And that is to see the suffering of countless Alterants end. To create one and only one Reality, where the strongest of each one of us can live, and where we can stop the torturous splitting of worlds.”

“I've never heard you put it quite that way before,” Master George said. “I remember your talk of a Utopia, a paradise, a place where all can be happy. The way you describe it now sounds more like the wishes of an evil, insane, power-hungry monster. What's happened to you, Jane?”

She paused to let him speak, but then acted as if she hadn't heard a word he said, continuing her lecture without missing a beat. “The first step of my plan is not going to be easy. I hardly expect any of you to understand what I do or to give it your blessing. But I couldn't possibly care less. For what the lot of you have done to me, I don't expect to let most of you live long enough to see the end come to pass.”

She paused, turning her head to look at each person in the room. “But you all will see what I plan for tomorrow. You'll see it, and you'll know my power once and for all.”

Master George wouldn't quit pushing. “Jane, this is madness.”

“Madness?” she repeated. “I tried it your way, the *Realitants'* way. And look what I got in return.” She motioned to her face and robed body with her

hideous hands then held them up for everyone to see. “The irony is, that by ruining me physically, you’ve helped me more than you know. Not only can I channel my abilities more acutely than ever before, but I’ve been reminded of what I knew from the beginning. That the only way to accomplish anything is by taking the hard road, the harsh road. The sometimes cruel and hateful road. Never before has it been so true that the ends will justify the means. I’ll never stray from the path again. Never.”

Tick felt heat simmering inside him as she spoke, growing and intensifying with every word. Though he didn’t really know the specifics of what she was talking about, he could hear the evil in her voice, the horrible intent of her words. He could almost *feel* it, just like the pulse that had brought him down here in the first place. The pulse. What had that been?

“As you can see,” Jane continued, “I’m learning more each and every day about how to use the gifts that have been given to me. Take the waterkelts, for example. You’d be amazed at how easy it is to manipulate the molecules of our favorite liquid.”

Tick’s anger grew, heat boiling in his chest. And despite his better judgment, this time he didn’t stop it. Jane had obviously noticed.

“Atticus, are we going to have a problem?” she asked coolly. But he thought he heard the slightest trace of concern, and she definitely took a small step backward. She feared him; he knew it.

“Tick,” his dad said next to him, turning toward him and gripping him by the shoulders. “Are you feeling it again? Push it away, hold it back, do something.” The worry creasing his face tore at Tick’s heart, so he looked away, back at Jane.

His mom squeezed his arm, then whispered in his ear. “Atticus, pull it back. Go through the breathing exercises. Son, we’re not going to let her hurt —”

“I won’t listen to another word she says!” Tick screamed. He was losing control and felt his body trembling. He had to *do* something. “We can’t just let her talk like this to us!” His skin burned. He looked at his arms, half-expecting to see blisters and smoke. But all was normal.

“Atticus—” his mom said.

She stepped away from him, as did his dad. Tick looked over at Sofia and Paul, their eyes wide. They were scared of him. They were *all* scared of him. He noticed Master George’s hand had slipped into his pocket, fingering something there. Tick knew it had to be another shot of whatever Sofia had used to knock him out in Chu’s mountain office building.

Tick didn’t know what to do. He felt the heat inside him, the power, weaken a little. He looked back at Jane, hoping to reignite it. She hadn’t moved, but her mask was pulled back in fury.

“You can’t stand against me,” Jane said. “Not now, not after what you did to me. Stop now, or you’ll spend the rest of your short life regretting it.”

“What did I do to you?” Tick spat back at her. “You tried to kill me!”

“What did you do? What did you *do*?” Jane stepped forward, closer than before, regaining her ground. “You took the strongest parts of the most powerful weapon ever created by man and melded them with a woman already equipped with a control over Chi’karda never seen before. That’s what you *did*, Atticus. Your selfish, cowardly act will end up being the very thing that will allow me to win.”

“It . . . will . . . not,” Tick said, concentrating with every ounce of brain power he could muster, trying to sense, to feel, to grasp the boiling Chi’karda within him. He remembered last year when Jane had pulled it out of him in a cloud of orange sparkles, a mist of tangible power. He tried to visualize it the same way, tried to *touch* it.

“Stop it,” Jane warned. “Stop it *now!*”

“Atticus,” his mom pleaded. “She’s right. Now’s not the time!”

“Tick, pull it back before you kill yourself!” Sofia yelled.

The others shouted similar words at him. Master George pulled what looked like an ordinary pen from his pocket. But Tick couldn’t stop. He couldn’t let Jane do anything to harm his friends and family.

He turned his attention back to her, focusing again on the burning power within him, holding onto it in a way he could’ve never described to anyone. Then he threw it at Jane. Screaming, he leaned forward and threw the power at her, pushing it away from him in a rush of energy and invisible flame.

A thunderclap shook the room as Jane stumbled backward, fiery sparks exploding all around her. Boxes tumbled, people fell to the ground. There was shouting and yelling. Somewhere, glass shattered. Another thunderclap, a thump of booming sound, shook the whole house. Streaks of orange mist swirled throughout the basement like ribbons of sunset, slashing this way and that. Tick felt as if lava flowed in his veins and thought his head might explode from the pressure.

Still, he kept *pushing*, kept aiming every bit of his strength at Jane.

She didn’t fall. She planted her feet against the onslaught. Her red mask raged. Thunder continued to blast the air in repeated bursts, filling the world full of noise. A loud, piercing, terrible *noise* that only fed Tick’s fire.

But then, somehow, through all that sound, he heard Jane’s voice, as crystal clear as if she’d spoken directly into his ear in a silent room. It took a moment for her words to register, for him to comprehend exactly what she was saying, but when it clicked, when he realized what he was jeopardizing, what he was risking, he immediately pulled it all back, all of it. He had no idea how he did it, but in an instant the power vanished, sucked back into him

and quenched like a candle in a rainstorm.

Jane had said four words.

“I have your sisters.”

Latitude and Longitude

Frazier Gunn walked through the thick forest, trying his hardest to ignore the humidity that tried to suck the life out of him and fill his lungs with heavy water. Every breath seemed an effort, and every inch of clothing clung to his skin. He was miserably uncomfortable.

And then there were the insects: almost microscopic gnats that swarmed in small packs around his nose and eyes, tiny dragonflies that appeared to love the darkness and warmth of the human inner ear—at least that's where they kept trying to get to, wasps and bees. But the mosquitoes were the worst—big as moths and drinking up his blood like miniature vampires. With his free hand, he swatted the latest one to land on his neck, then looked at the greasy dark smear on his palm. Disgusting.

His other hand was occupied, gripping a makeshift handle on the end of a thick rope, which dangled away behind him to its other end, tied loosely around the neck of a woman. He didn't want to hurt her, but he couldn't have her running away, either. Her long, black hair was matted against her face and head, and her clothes were soaked with sweat, but she kept Frazier's pace, never uttering a word of complaint.

Yes, she was a criminal, but she was also an Alterant of Mistress Jane. She looked just like her except for the long mane of hair. But it was the same face, the same—

Frazier faltered in his steps, almost tripping over a big root. He'd forgotten—just for the barest of moments—that his boss no longer had the beauty and grace that had distinguished her for so many years. She'd yet to show him her face, but he'd seen enough—just her *hands* were enough—to know that the Higginbottom kid had done something truly horrific to her body. The poor woman Frazier dragged along behind him was a goddess compared to Mistress Jane now.

The thought saddened and angered him in equal parts, and when they rounded a massively thick oak tree, he accidentally jerked on the rope. The Alterant yelped behind him and stumbled to the ground, gurgling out a choke as the noose tightened. Frazier quickly got her back on her feet and apologized, though he knew it was empty and cold. He kept thinking of her as his boss, and he had to stop it.

On they went, hiking their way through the hot, wilted, miserable forest.

Frazier was exhausted. The only other person in the Realities to whom he'd dare entrust this assignment was Mistress Jane herself, and she obviously couldn't do it. If two Alterants met face to face, bad things happened. Reginald Chu had discovered that little gem of information himself, and now he was stuck in some place Frazier hoped he'd never see. The Nonex. What a stupid name.

It wasn't just the humidity and the heat that had Frazier so tired. It was more the fact that he had to do the same thing twelve times—taking each Alterant to the exact same location in each of their respective Realities, leaving them chained and secure, but with enough food and water to survive until the plans were complete. He'd already finished with ten; two more to go. But only a handful of Realities had GPS equipment in the air, so most of the time he had to use maps and human guides to find the latitude and longitude coordinates. It was a real pain in the bahoontkas.

This world had the satellites and the technology, for which he was extremely grateful. Having a group of jabbering guides and a backpack full of maps didn't sound like something he could handle right now, trudging through the dense, suffocating woods. The Blade component strapped across his shoulders was plenty heavy enough, and sweat poured down his body in streams. He looked at his GPS navigation watch—the one he'd, um, taken for free from a poor sucker back in Carson City, the closest patch of civilization to this wretched place. They were close to the destination now.

Frazier squeezed his way through a clump of thin, gangly trees into a wide patch of vegetation. His spirits lifted slightly. Maybe they were past the thickest part of the forest. Kicking and pounding down with his foot, he pushed his way through the thick, clinging growth, leading the Alterant and moving ever closer toward the exact latitude and longitude of the Blade location. By the time he saw another grove of gigantic trees looming up ahead, his watch beeped, once, long and loud.

They'd reached the fifty-foot radius point.

If he hadn't had a prisoner behind him, tied and bound to him and watching his every move, he would have dropped to his knees and howled at the sky in delirious joy. Of the now eleven times he'd made this journey, this one had been the most difficult. It was the heat; it had to be the heat. He felt utter dread knowing he still had one more Reality ahead of him. But, for now, he allowed himself some elation, at least a little. Even if he did keep it on the inside.

"We're here," he said, making sure he didn't allow the relief to trickle into his voice. "I need a minute to set up. Don't try anything. Or, um, I'll have to, um, kill you." Of course, not in a million years would he do that—the Blade operation was way too important, and it couldn't happen if even one of the

Alterants died—but *she* didn't know that.

"Where's here?" the woman asked, her voice hoarse and scratchy. "Why won't you tell me anything?"

"Because you don't need to know." Frazier walked a little way farther until they were in the rough middle of the designated area. He let go of the rope, giving the prisoner the evil eye as he did so, knowing she'd get the message. He swung the Blade component off his shoulders, unhooked the leather straps, and let it thump to the ground in front of him.

"I've dealt with people a lot worse than you," she said in a raw whisper.

Frazier barely heard her. He was down on his knees, studying the Blade. Or, more accurately, a *part* of the Blade. One of thirteen parts, it was a beautiful piece of work. Made of the blackest stone—a substance that did not even *exist* in any Reality, at least not naturally—it had no measurable shape or dimensions. Twisty, curvy, and slightly elongated, it was like a beautiful, abstract sculpture, with dozens of thin strands connecting two bulky end pieces, all of it harder and stronger than the toughest metal or stone. And blacker than the deepest, starless night.

Jane had *made* this. She'd created it. He'd begged her to explain how she'd done it, explain what the material was, explain the science behind it. But she always refused, saying it was on such a deep and complex level he'd never understand. A lot of it, she finally told him, came about purely on instinct, a result of her digging through the wonders of quantum physics and spacetime. But on several occasions, when she otherwise seemed asleep or lost in thought, he'd heard her whisper two words:

Dark matter.

He was sure of it. She'd said *dark matter*. Whether or not it had anything to do with the Blade, he couldn't be sure. He certainly had no idea if what lay in front of him now was made of dark matter or contained it somehow. But his gut told him that his boss had stumbled upon a discovery that would alter the Realities forever if she ever chose to share it with her fellow scientists. But that, he knew, would never happen.

Dark matter.

He shivered, and feeling the chill in the brutal heat ripped him out of his wandering thoughts. He snapped his head up to look at the Alterant, who stood quietly, everything from her face to her hands to her clothes seeming to wilt toward the ground, a display of misery. He felt truly sorry for her, and knew it was because of how much she looked like Mistress Jane.

"I'm sorry this has been so rough on you," he said, positive she'd think he was up to something and not being sincere. He didn't care. "Sometimes I lose myself in the amazing things we're trying to accomplish. Sometimes I . . . forget that the people we hurt along the way are human."

The woman stared at him, disgust wrinkling up her face. Then she spat on the twisted black stone. “You can take your sick voodoo toys and shove ’em up your nose. Go ahead and kill me. Do whatever. I don’t care.”

Frazier couldn’t take his eyes off her for a long moment. She looked so much like his boss, it hurt his heart to hear her say such things. He felt a sudden surge of something between pain and love. He wanted to go to the woman, hold her, kiss her. In that instant, he didn’t want to hurt her like this.

“Get your ugly eyes off me,” she said. “I’ve seen rats who look more intelligent than you.”

That ended his brief flare of weakness. He reached out and grabbed the rope around her neck. He stood up and made her sit on the roughly flat surface of the Blade’s top bulky section. The thin strands of hard, black stone twisted and curved their way down until they connected with the bottom section. They looked like a clump of wires. Maybe, he thought, somehow that’s what they were.

“Sit there and don’t say another word,” he said as he wrapped the rope around her body twice and then strung the rope through the tight spaces between those strings of dark rock. Once he’d tied that off, he took a set of metal shackles from his pack and clamped them around the Alterant’s ankles, securing them to a couple of strands that bent out more than the others. There was no way she could get away, and the stone was far too heavy for her to drag and shuffle along in tiny steps.

Everything was set.

“Are you going to leave me here?” she asked, having lost her bravery from a minute before. “Let me die?”

“Yes and no.” He loved giving that answer, loved seeing the perplexed look that came over the Alterant’s face when he said it.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she responded.

Frazier placed the prepared sack of food and water next to her feet. “Just answering your question.” He stood up, then turned and started to walk away.

“*Wait!*” she screamed. “Please! I can help you. I’m the best of the best! Please don’t leave me here! *Please!*”

Frazier didn’t respond. He found it was better that way. He just kept walking, knowing it’d be easier to make it to the winking point without a huge block of stone on his back and dragging a prisoner behind him. Ignoring her desperate pleas, he reached the end of the swatch of vegetation and reentered the vast forest.

The Blade of Shattered Hope was almost complete.

Part 2

The Black Tree

Sweet Digs

Mothball had to grab Sato and physically pull him away from the spectacle. The sight was just too hard to believe and had put him in a daze. Luckily the fighting clowns didn't seem to notice them.

"Come on," she yelled at him, dragging him across the field as easily as a sack of raked leaves. "Soon as those lugs take notice we've got one the likes of you, we'll be the ones they be fightin', not themselves—bet your buttons. Come *on!*"

Sato finally got his feet under him and regained his composure, walking quickly alongside Mothball as Rutger struggled to keep up. "What *was* that? Who are those people?"

"Bugaboo soldiers," she replied. "Nasty people, they are. Completely insane."

Sato forced out a chuckle. "They're dressed like *clowns* and trying to stab each other with sharp swords. What makes you think they're crazy?"

Mothball seemed to miss his sarcasm. "Not right in the head. Been crazy ever since the war ended, not knowing what to do when there's no one to fight. Rutger, chop-chop, little man!"

Sato turned to see Rutger a good twenty feet behind them, pumping his short little arms as he tried his best to run. "Slow *down!*" the short man yelled. "Before I croak!"

They topped a small, sparsely wooded rise and headed down the other side. Once they were out of sight from the odd group of battling clowns, Mothball finally stopped and allowed Rutger to catch up. The poor man's face was blood red—a cherry on top of a black ball. Sato expected a blur of insults and smart remarks from Rutger, but it was all the guy could do to breathe, heaving air in and out.

"I still don't get it," Sato said. "Who *are* those people?"

Mothball rolled her eyes, in a rare bad mood. "'Tis a long story and no time to tell it. Once we make it to me mum's house, you can ask your questions. Can we go now?" She loomed over Rutger with her hands on her hips.

The robust little man looked up at her. "How far?"

"Just 'round the bend up yonder," she answered, pointing toward a small paved lane that came out of a forest to their right and went over the next hill.

“We can stop runnin’, we can. I ’spect them Bugaboos’ll be quite occupied for a spell. Come on.” She headed off for the road.

Sato looked at Rutger. “Do you know anything about these Bugaboo soldiers?”

Rutger shrugged, a movement that shook his whole body. “Enough not to bug Mothball about it. She has a *long* history with those nutsos. Let’s just get to her house and then we can talk about it.”

“Whatever,” Sato muttered, consumed with curiosity. Sword-fighting clowns were bad enough, and the fact that Mothball was scared of them only made it worse. He felt a disturbing chill that made him shudder. “Let’s go.”

Rutger started off down the hill, and Sato followed.

~

The road led to a cluster of homes surrounded by an enormously tall wall of roughly mortared stones. In fact, everything about the neighborhood was tall: the houses, the trees, the carriages and their horses. And once he got past the sheer size of it all, Sato was amazed at how medieval everything looked.

What kind of a world had Mothball grown up in?

She seemed to sense his thoughts. “Don’t ya worry, Master Sato. Plenty of fancy things in this Reality—cars and tellies and the like. We just enjoy livin’ the old-fashioned way ’round these parts.”

“Just be glad they have fridges and real toilets,” Rutger muttered.

They made it to the wide opening of the border wall, where a massive iron gate was closed and locked to prevent anyone from entering.

“Can’t be lettin’ in the Bugaboos,” Mothball said. “Gate stays closed every minute, ’less you say the password.” She took a deep breath, then yelled in a slow, booming voice, “Donkey hoe tea!”

Sato wasn’t sure he’d heard right. “Did you just say *Don Quixote*? Like the book?”

Groans and creaks of metal filled the air as the gate swung inward.

“No, never ’eard of that one,” Mothball responded as she stepped forward to enter. “I said *donkey . . . hoe . . . tea*. Chooses three random words, it does, and every day’s different.”

Sato hurried to keep up with her, Rutger hustling along right behind him. “It? What is *it*?” A loud clang announced the gate had closed again.

“Old Billy’s fancy ’puter that runs the place. The gate, the lights, the whole bit.”

Sato couldn’t help but be fascinated by this Reality. Up until now, he’d seen only the cemeteries of Tick’s Alterants, and he was excited to have a break and meet more people, see if they were a lot like Mothball.

A gravel path led them from the entrance through a greener than green patch of grass, speckled with red and yellow and purple wildflowers. A slight breeze picked up, running across the grass in waves, bringing a sweet scent along with it. It hit Sato that the temperature was perfect here—not too cold and not too hot. For the first time in awhile, he had the urge to kick back and relax, take a long vacation. And right here in his tall friend’s neighborhood seemed like the perfect place.

With a deep sigh, surprised at his sudden good mood, he followed Mothball as the path intersected a wide, cobblestone road, running away from them for at least half a mile, both sides of the road lined with those ancient-styled houses. Made of large rocks and roughly hewn brick, the homes would have looked almost like natural formations that had stood for a thousand years, except for the countless boxes of flowers hanging here and there, the roofs thatched with bundles of long grasses, the multi-colored windows, and the brightly painted wooden doors—mostly reds and yellows.

And the yards. Sato was used to his home country of Japan, where the small homes sat almost on top of the streets and had maybe just enough room for a tiny tree and a single bush. But these houses had huge yards, filled with green grass and finely groomed bushes and majestic trees. And gardens. Lots and lots of gardens, growing every veggie and fruit known to man, by the looks of it.

As they walked down the street in silence, Sato had the feeling that if he’d been born in this Reality instead of his own, he would’ve grown up the happiest person ever. How could anyone be grumpy in a place like this?

Then he remembered those psycho people dressed up like clowns and fighting each other with swords. The big stone wall and locked iron gate. Maybe life here wasn’t so blissful after all.

“Which one’s yours?” Sato asked. “And where is everybody?” He’d yet to see one other person.

Mothball absently pointed somewhere up ahead. “Just a bit farther. And most folks are off to town, doin’ their jobs and such. Them that ain’t are havin’ afternoon tea in their parlor, I ’spect.”

“I don’t think my feet will ever forgive you,” Rutger said through heavy breaths. “We need to bury a bunch of dead people in your backyard so we can wink straight there next time.”

“Mayhaps we’ll start with you,” Mothball replied.

Rutger barked a fake laugh. “Well, the way my heart’s beating, you just might be right! I’ve probably lost ten pounds already.”

“Walk another few weeks straight, and maybe you can fit through me mum’s door without me kickin’ ya in the ruddy bottoms.” She laughed, a rolling stutter of thunder that lifted Sato’s spirits even more.

“You guys are the weirdest best friends I’ve ever met,” Sato said. “Maybe you should just go ahead and get married.”

“Married?” Mothball roared. “What, and have little monster babies with my ugly face on little balls of fat? Methinks I’d rather marry a horse.”

“Feeling’s mutual!” Rutger countered.

“Would eat a lot less, that’s for sure,” Mothball murmured.

“And wouldn’t complain at your incessant gibbering!”

“Smell better, too.”

“You know what they say—sometimes a husband and wife look like brother and sister. You and a horse—well, perfect!”

Mothball scratched her chin, acting like she couldn’t hear him. “There’d be horse patties lyin’ ’round about me flat. Might get a bit messy.”

“Okay, this is getting creepy,” Sato interjected. “Where’s your house?”

Mothball stopped, then threw her arms up and clapped once as she looked at the large home to their right. “Well, bite me buttons, here we are!”

The house and yard looked a lot like the others, though the front door was pink. Mothball’s proclamation had barely ended when the door swung open and a gigantic woman with a huge mop of curly black hair on her head came rushing out to greet them. Her clothes were the same style as Mothball’s—loose, dull colors, hanging off her skin-and-bones body like drying laundry. Or maybe *dying* laundry.

“Me love!” the lady yelled as she ran down the stone steps, all gangly legs and arms making her look as if she might collapse into a heap of sticks at any second. “Oh, me sweet, sweet love! Been ’specting you, we ’ave!”

She reached Mothball, and they squeezed each other tightly, circling around, both of them crying. Sato looked away, uncomfortable at intruding on something intimate and personal. When they finally let go of each other, Mothball pointed straight at him.

“This here’s Master Sato,” she said proudly. “And, of course you know Rutger, me best friend.”

“Ah, yes, yes,” her tall mom replied, the enormous smile she’d worn since opening the door still there. Sato noticed her teeth were just as crooked as her daughter’s, but much whiter. “So good to see you again, Rutger. And you, Sato, welcome. My name is Windasill, and I’m so happy to say we’ve finally met. I’ve been waiting for months.”

“Really?” Sato said, surprised.

“Of course.” She looked at Mothball, a slight look of confusion on her face. “You didn’t tell him?”

Mothball shrugged, clearly embarrassed.

Sato couldn’t imagine what was going on. “Tell me? What didn’t you tell

me?”

Instead of answering, Mothball nodded at her mom.

Windasill grinned again and curtsied—quite the display from someone so big. “You do look just like him, I must say. A wee bit shorter’s all.” Then, inexplicably, she started crying, the stifled sobs accompanied by tears streaming out of her eyes.

Now he was beyond confused. “What are you *talking* about? What’s going on?”

Rutger answered for them. “Sato, you’re the Alterant of Grand Minister Sato Tadashi, who was the supreme ruler of this entire world—in this Reality anyway.”

“*Was?*” Sato repeated, not knowing how to react to the strange revelation.

Mothball’s mom answered, right after spitting on the ground. “Bugaboos killed him last month, they did, just weeks after he took office. Sacrificed hundreds of blokes to break through security and get to him. He was the most respected leader we’ve had in ages, despite being so young. Gone and dead now.”

“Why . . . why’d they kill him?” Sato asked. He had an uncomfortable feeling this was leading somewhere he wouldn’t like. Mothball’s answer confirmed it.

“They thought he was you.”

Sleepless in the Dark

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

That was all Tick could hear, and it was driving him crazy. The others were asleep, and even though the soft sighs and snores of their slumber floated through the air, all his mind could focus on was that stupid dripping water.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

Everything had happened so fast after Jane revealed that she'd kidnapped his sisters, Lisa and Kayla. The news shocked every bit of surging power out of him, and he'd collapsed to the floor in defeat, knowing he couldn't take the risk she might be lying. He couldn't risk their lives. Not them.

As soon as he'd given up, Jane had winked them all away. He didn't know how she did it, or who helped her, but one instant they'd been in his basement, and the next they were here, in some kind of cell made of gray stone, damp and cold and dark, with that maddening drip of water as a constant companion. The only light was faint, coming from somewhere down a long hallway outside the bars of their prison.

They'd been there for hours and hours. Every question in the world had been asked, every nook and cranny of the room examined, and they had shouted and screamed for help until their voices went hoarse. Then exhaustion crept in, and now everyone was asleep.

Except Tick. He huddled with his back against the hard, cold wall, his arms wrapped around his knees, his hands clasped in front of him. He felt empty, like his mind and heart had become a complete void of space, sucking every last bit of strength and will away. Jane had his sisters—but who knew where or how or why. And he was here, with his mom and dad, his two best friends, and the leader of the Realitants, all of them captured and helpless.

He'd tried several times to summon even the smallest trace of the power he'd felt against Jane in the basement of his house, but nothing came. Just emptiness. He floated in a void. A yucky, blecky, hopeless void.

“Tick?”

The voice startled him. He put his hands down to the ground, ready to

spring to his feet. But a second later he realized it was Sofia, just a few feet from him, lying down with her head resting on her folded arms. She pushed herself into a sitting position and looked at him. He could barely see the features of her face, but they didn't look as sad as he would've expected.

"Still here," he replied. "Did you actually fall asleep?"

She yawned in response. "Think so. Had a bad dream."

"I wish *this* were a bad dream."

"Yeah."

"Dude, I finally snooze and you guys wake me up." Paul was getting to his feet, rubbing his eyes. He made his way over to sit next to Tick and Sofia.

"You think the geezer and your mom and dad are actually sleeping?"

"I hope so," Tick said. "They're old—they need it."

"Actually," Sofia whispered, "the younger you are, the more sleep you need. Just for the record."

Tick wasn't in the mood for her smarts. "Whatever."

"So what do you think she's up to?" Paul asked. "Jane the Beast, I mean. And what's the deal with that robe and mask, the scratchy voice? Tick, you're the only one who's met her before—did she talk like that? Did she have that mask?"

Tick shook his head and was happy to realize he didn't feel any guilt at what Paul had just said. In fact, he wished she'd died. "Remember when I broke apart Dark Infinity and attacked her with it? I think it burned her and melted stuff all over her. Kind of like it . . . fused them together."

"And maybe it made her more powerful, too," Sofia added. "Maybe she somehow kept the powers of Chu's weapon. How else could she have winked into your basement *and* winked us all here?"

"Huh?" Tick asked. "How do you know *she* did it? Not someone with a Barrier Wand?"

Sofia pointed in front of her as if Jane were standing there. "Because I was staring at her the whole time. As soon as you quit trying to do whatever you were doing with your orange hocus-pocus stuff, she reached out with her hands and swept them through the air, like she was picking up a big pile of leaves and throwing them. Then I felt the tingle, and next thing I know, we're here."

"What *were* you doing to her, anyway?" Paul asked.

The question hit Tick like a thump in his chest. He hesitated, not knowing what to say.

"Hello?" Paul pushed. "Earth calling Atticus Higgin-bottom."

Tick shifted to get more comfortable. "I don't know, man. It's hard enough to understand it in my brain, much less explain it to you guys."

“Well, try,” Sofia said. “If we can help you figure out these freaky powers of yours, we might get out of here someday.”

Freaky powers, Tick thought. Did she have to say it that way? After a long pause, he cleared his throat and resolved to tell them everything. “Every time I’ve had an . . . episode, I feel this heat in my chest and gut, something burning inside me. I’ve been able to push it down a couple times recently and make it go away.”

“Hey,” Paul said, “at least that’s progress over what you did at Chu’s shack. Maybe you’re learning to control it.”

Tick nodded. “Maybe. Anyway, in my basement, I kind of panicked when Jane started talking, and when the heat came, I didn’t stop it. I . . . encouraged it, tried to hold onto it, make it grow. It was like I had these mental hands, trying to clasp invisible fingers around an invisible . . . something. I don’t know—I can’t describe it. It took a lot of focus and concentration. Then, I just mentally threw it at her. I guess I attacked her just by thinking it and wanting it.”

Paul and Sofia stared at him, apparently at a loss for words, a minor miracle with those two.

“Anyway,” Tick continued, “it felt really good. I still think I’m a long way from controlling it anytime I want to, but this was about a billion times better than what happened a few months ago. Back then it was like somebody had ripped my spirit out of my body, and I couldn’t do anything about it.”

“What *is* the power?” Paul asked. “I mean, you’re doing some crazy stuff here, dude.”

“It’s Chi’karda, brainiac,” Sofia answered. “We know that much. For some reason Tick has a ton of it.”

Paul shook his head. “I know it’s Chi’karda—at least, that’s what Master Georgie boy over there thinks.” He pointed to the snoozing man, who looked a little ridiculous all dressed up in a prison cell. “But what does that *mean*?”

“What do you mean, what does it mean?” Sofia said.

“I mean, what does it mean?”

Sofia blew out a loud breath. “I don’t know what it means.”

“Man,” Tick said, “we are really making progress here.”

They stayed quiet for awhile, and then Sofia broke the silence. “Well, we can leave the science side of it to Master George and the Realitants. We just need to help you learn how to control it so we can use it. As a weapon.”

“Yeah,” Paul agreed. “How about right now? I don’t think I’m up for hanging around here much longer.”

Weapon. For some reason that word gave Tick the chills. He didn’t want to think of himself as a potential killing device. “It doesn’t matter right now. I

can't feel anything, not even a flicker."

"Maybe you need to be ticked off," Paul said. "Here, let me kick you in the ___"

"I'm good, thanks." Tick scooted away.

"Just start thinking about stuff," Sofia suggested. "Think about Jane and what she's done to us and how we're sitting in this prison. Think about your . . ." She didn't finish, looking at the ground as if she'd just confessed something horrible.

Tick felt tears glisten his eyes. "You were going to say *sisters*. Think about my sisters."

Sofia looked up at him, then nodded.

"Maybe that's why I'm so empty," Tick said, hearing the gloom in his own voice. "She threatened to hurt them if I try anything, so my subconscious won't even let me get close to trying."

"Man," Paul said, "guess we shouldn't expect you to, then. Too risky."

"What *are* we going to do?" Sofia pleaded.

Master George stirred to their right, grunting as he rolled over and pushed himself into a sitting position. He let out a huge yawn while rubbing his eyes. "Goodness gracious me, how long have I been sleeping?"

"Couple hours," Tick said.

"I had the strangest dream," the leader of the Realitants said in a groggy voice. "I was in your basement, Master Atticus, and I saw a person in a big rabbit suit. It was a very creepy bunny. Quite disturbing. I woke up just as the person started to take off his head. What I would give to have seen the face beneath the mask."

"It's symbolic," Sofia said. "Jane wears a mask now. I'm sure it's her you would've seen."

"Uh, what about the whole bunny thing?" Paul asked with a slight snicker.

"Well," Master George began, clearing his throat, embarrassed. "I was, er, a bit frightened of bunnies as a child."

Tick shocked himself when he laughed out loud. So did Paul.

"Poke fun if you must," Master George countered, though he had a smile on his face. "You try falling into a cage filled with a dozen hungry rabbits and see how—"

A loud metal clang cut him off, and they all turned to see the iron-grilled door to their cell swing open. Standing behind it in the hallway was Mistress Jane, still dressed in her yellow robe and her expressionless red mask. There was a cart next to her, loaded with several plates of steaming food.

"My, you all look cozy," she said. "I've brought you something to eat. I can't have you starving to death before our big plans come to fruition." She

pushed the cart into the cell then swung the heavy door shut again. Its clanking ring echoed like some haunted musical instrument.

She turned to walk away, apparently done with them.

“Where are we?” Master George shouted at her.

Jane stopped, but did not look at them. “You’re in the Thirteenth Reality, George. Though it won’t be called that much longer.”

She started walking again, and soon was out of sight.

Questions without Answers

Mothball's dad was actually shorter than his wife, and, impossibly, even nicer. His dark hair and the angled features of his face would have looked hard and cold except for the permanent smile breaking it all up. He ushered Sato and the others into the huge living room, where they all sat down with cups of steaming hot tea. His name was Tollaseat, and he wore a bright red sweater with his drab-colored pants. He looked about as unfashionable as a person could possibly get.

As for the inside of the house, it was finely decorated. Bookshelves made of a dark and shiny wood were everywhere, some of them stocked with leather-bound books, others with various porcelain sculptures, dishes, and other knickknacks. The furniture all seemed a little fancy, with frilly carvings and flower prints and lacy stuff here and there. But at least the chairs were comfortable, and the soft carpet was easily three inches thick. Over a huge fireplace—which looked like it could burn an entire forest in no time—hung a portrait of an old woman just as tall and awkward-looking as Mothball and her mother.

“So,” Tollaseat said, his voice like a massive tolling bell, “Sato, my friend, I can't tell you how nice it is to finally meet you.”

“Thanks,” Sato said, nodding with a curt smile. He couldn't quite settle down, trying desperately to come to terms with his connection to the recently murdered ruler of the Fifth Reality. Why would a fifteen-year-old kid be the leader of an entire planet? It was just too bizarre. And if those Bugaboo soldiers—what a ridiculous name!—really wanted him dead . . .

Rutger cleared his throat. He was perched on a chair, his short legs dangling like a little kid's. He glanced sidelong at Sato. “You'll have to excuse our new Realitant friend. He's not one for a lot of words. I'm sure he's very happy to meet you too.”

“Ah,” Tollaseat scoffed, waving at the air with both hands. “No bother, really, no bother at all. We're simply thrilled to have the lot of you come and sit a spell. No need for jabbering and such.”

Sato had to figure this out. “Could someone please explain to me about my Alterant? How could these psycho clown soldiers possibly think I'd come to

this world and become the . . . what did you call it?”

“Grand Minister,” Windasill said quietly, as if indulging a child taking a quiz.

Sato snapped his fingers. “Yeah, that. How could they think I’d become the Grand Minister of the Fifth Reality? And why would they want to kill me in the first place?”

Mothball was sitting directly across from him. She leaned forward and put her elbows on her knees. “We think the Bugs and Mistress Jane have gone off and made some type of nasty arrangement. Mayhaps done it quite some time ago. And we reckon old Jane put out the scoop on you and your friends. Looking for revenge, she was. Just happens that your Alterant became our Minister, and the Bugs thought maybe we’d planted you. Replaced Sato Tadashi in a swap. Like we’d wanna ruddy take over the Reality or some such nonsense.”

“They must be the dumbest people in the universe,” Rutger muttered.

“No, no, my friend,” Tollaseat said, shaking his head. “Crazy, vicious, bloodsucking tyrants, maybe. But not dumb. That I can promise ya.”

Sato ran a hand through his hair, not sure which bothered him more: that his Alterant just happened to be the ruler of an entire planet, or that a group of crazy clown soldiers wanted him dead. Scratch that, he thought. The second one was definitely worse.

“Wait a minute,” he said, just realizing something that should’ve been obvious from the start. “How could they possibly think that guy was me? Wouldn’t he have been way taller?”

“Not really,” Tollaseat answered. “Most of us chaps here in the Fifth don’t hit our growth spurts ’til we hit drinkin’ age. That not the same in your neck of the woods?”

Sato shrugged his shoulders wearily. “This is weird,” he said, as if those three words summed up everything. Maybe they did. “I really feel like I’m missing something. And why’d you guys bring me here if you knew all this?”

Mothball’s face scrunched up into a look of apology. “Sorry ’bout that. Really I am. Never thought we’d run into the Bugs. They ’aven’t been about much lately, according to me parents. Thought their troubles with these parts was quite well and over.”

“Quite true,” Tollaseat added. “Had our wars with ’em blokes back when Mothball was a wee one, but not seen ’em much since. No idea why they’re up in the deadie fields today. Strange, really.”

Sato folded his arms and stared at the floor. Staying here much longer didn’t sound like a good idea. “Well, maybe we should go back to headquarters. If those clowns want to kill me, I’d just as soon not be hanging out a couple of miles from them.”

“Leave before supper?” Tollaseat exclaimed, shooting up from his seat. “Not a chance. I’ve got all three ovens runnin’ top heat, cookin’ a feast like you’ve never seen before, young man. Bugs ’ave no idea you’re ’ere, I’d bet me left shoe. You just sit there and enjoy yourself with me wife and daughter while I go ready things up.”

Windasill reached out and patted Sato on the knee. “I married the best cook in the entire valley, I did. Good thing me blood runs fast and hot, or I’d look like poor Rutger sitting over there.”

Sato felt his eyes widen. He glanced quickly over at Rutger, who didn’t seem fazed in the least by the rude comment.

“I’d rather be down close to the ground,” the man said. “Safe and balanced, fat and happy. Lot better than looking like a bunch of dusty bones with clothes.”

Windasill laughed, the nicest sound Sato remembered hearing in a long time. “Oh, Rutger, we do love you so. Every last inch of you—and that’s saying quite a lot.” Giggling, she left the room, presumably to help her husband in the kitchen.

Once she was gone, Sato sat up straighter and glared first at Rutger, then Mothball. “This is crazy. Is all that stuff true?”

“Right as rain,” Mothball replied. “What’s all the fuss? We’ll have our dinner and be on our way, we will.”

Rutger rolled forward until he plopped off the chair and onto his feet. “If anything, you’re safer than ever. They think they killed you, remember? Calm down, and let’s go eat. I’m—”

“Let me guess,” Sato interrupted. “Starving.”

“How’d you know?”

“Come on, funny bunnies,” Mothball said, standing up on her tall legs. “I could use a bite to eat myself.” She reached down and swatted Rutger on the back before moving toward the kitchen, her best friend right on her heels.

Sato stared at their backs until they disappeared out of the room. How weird had his life become? He was standing in a house that made him feel like he was four feet tall, in an entirely different world, about to eat dinner with three giants and a man shaped like a big beach ball, in a place where his twin had been the leader of the entire planet and had been assassinated by insane men dressed like clowns.

Could it get any stranger?

Refusing to answer that question, he walked quickly out of the room and toward the wonderful smells wafting from the kitchen.

The Twelfth Blade

Frazier Gunn stared down at the twelfth Alterant of Mistress Jane.

She was huge. And she was the last of them.

This one had been living a normal life in a small village in the Fifth Reality, where quirks of evolution, diet, and climactic factors had led to an unusually large race of humans. He guessed the woman sitting in front of him, now safely chained to the twisty black stone of the twelfth Blade component, had to be almost eight feet tall, and skinny— like she'd eaten nothing but lettuce her whole life. Crooked teeth, no makeup, stringy black hair.

And yet, even then, she was beautiful. Despite the tears streaming down her face, despite the constant begging, despite the disgusting way she wrung her hands and wiped snot from her nose with her fingers, she was beautiful to him. Maybe it was just the resemblance to Jane. He hadn't seen her in days and missed her terribly. Maybe it was his longing for how she'd looked before the terrible Atticus Higginbottom incident. Maybe it was a lot of things.

But he was wasting time. He had to get back to the Thirteenth.

"Please," the woman whimpered for the thousandth time since being dragged from her garden. With her size and surprising strength, Frazier had been forced to use the Stunning Rod Jane had created for him, jolting the Alterant every so often to remind her to cooperate. It'd been a long and grueling trip. But nothing could dampen his spirits now—it was over. The hardest mission of his life was finally over.

Now the exciting part would begin.

"Please don't leave me here," the Alterant said between loud sniffs. "I 'ave children, I do. Me husband's away. None to take care of the wee ones."

Frazier leaned over, looking her square in the eyes. "Please be quiet." He dropped a pack of food and water at her feet then straightened and turned to walk away, moving as quickly as he could so he wouldn't have to hear her wailing pleas for help. He knew he should've told her what a good cause she was participating in, how eventually great things would come from Jane's plan with the Blade of Shattered Hope. But he couldn't bring himself to do it. He was too tired to speak anymore.

He topped a rise and quickly went down the deep slope. The woman's screeching, painful cries finally faded into the background. Capturing her had been the worst by far, maybe because she was the only one who hadn't had

some kind of criminal or shady background. Of course, the pitiful lady didn't know this, but she had very good reason to feel such hopeless desperation.

Of the twelve Alterants of Mistress Jane, this one in the Fifth would be the only one to die. Well, this time around, anyway.

~

Mistress Jane stood at her favorite spot in the entire Lemon Fortress—maybe her favorite spot in all of the Realities. The open window of her room overlooked countless miles of forests, fields of green grass and wildflowers, and the snowcapped mountains in the distance. The beauty of it was overwhelming, even as seen through the eyeholes of her mask.

Normally she'd take it off, but she expected Frazier to report at any minute. And despite several months having passed since her entire body had been scorched and mutilated by Higginbottom, she had yet to let anyone see her true self—only her hands, so they'd know something horrible had happened. But she was still too ashamed, too embarrassed to reveal any other part of her now-hideous body. *Especially* her face. A face that had once, she thought proudly, been very, very beautiful.

A face that now looked like the scarred surface of a planet too close to a boiling sun.

At least the pain had subsided somewhat. With her increased powers over Chi'karda, she'd spent many days experimenting until she'd finally been able to manipulate her nervous system, a complex network of seemingly infinite human "wires." In the beginning she could only reduce the pain when she concentrated, focusing in deep meditation. But as the weeks passed, she'd come to learn to do it on instinct, and life had become much sweeter. More conducive to fulfilling her long-awaited plans.

But, unfortunately, she was still a long way from changing her appearance. For now, she had to settle for the robe and the mask to hide herself from the world, even from her closest friends.

Friends, with an "s" at the end? She was being far too generous. Only one person in all the Realities considered her a friend—Frazier.

Speaking of the devil, she heard a knock at the door.

"Come in," she said, sending out a wave of Chi'karda to dissolve the door, something she'd done a thousand times—much more satisfying than merely pulling it open, and a task that was much easier now with her supercharged abilities over the realm of physics.

She looked over from where she stood next to the window, and after Frazier had stepped through, she imagined the billions of tiny particles that made up the wood of the door coming back together. She *pushed* a mental surge in that direction, and with a buzzing swoosh, the door appeared as it had seconds before, unblemished and whole.

With another mere thought, she made one of the eyebrows on her red metal mask arch upward. “Is it finished?”

Frazier walked over, obviously trying his hardest not to smile, but it was there anyway, especially in his eyes. “Yes, Mistress. The twelfth one is in place, secured in the Fifth. All of them have nanolocators and monitoring devices injected within their bodies. The observation area is alive and chirping as we speak. All we need now is—”

“I know what we need!” Jane snapped, flinging her mask into anger. “Honestly, Frazier, sometimes you act as if all this were your idea, your plan. Keep speaking to me like I’m some lowly wretch, and I’ll end your service to me—swiftly and painfully, I assure you. I don’t care who you are or what you’ve done for me.”

She regretted the words even as they flew out of her mouth, hating the look of sincere and utter hurt that melted the poor man’s face. But they had to be said. Once again, Frazier had shown traces of . . . confidence. Too much of it. She couldn’t allow it. Confidence led to insubordination and betrayal. Always.

“I’m sorry, Mistress,” Frazier muttered, his eyes downcast, his hands folded in front of him. “I’m only excited to see our—um, I mean, *your* plan—come to fruition.”

There it was again, even after she’d rebuked him. *Our* plan—he’d actually said it! As much as it would hurt her, and as much as it would cause even more loneliness for her, she had to distance herself from him. Now more than ever.

“Very well, Frazier. Have a seat.” She gestured toward the couch by the fireplace, then followed behind him until he sat down. She sat in the armchair directly across from him. The stone hearth to their right was dark and cold.

Bringing her mask back to a smooth, calm expression, she crossed her legs under the loose folds of her robe, instinctively suppressing the pain with her power the instant she felt it. “Let’s be clear. All twelve of my Alterants are currently chained to the Blade devices, in each Reality, including Prime, within the specified ranges of the needed coordinates?”

Frazier nodded, his face now pale. *Ah*, she thought. She *had* gone too far. When the man got too frightened, he became useless. Somehow she needed to learn how to hold back.

“Are you certain they’re undisturbed?” she asked, trying to speak with a soothing voice. For all his tendency to fear her, he usually melted back to stupefied worship easily enough. “They’re all alive and well?”

He only nodded again, but some of the color had returned to his face.

“Any potential problems?”

“Well, Mistress,” he said, croaking a bit on the last syl-lable. He cleared

his throat. “The coordinates in each Reality were in pretty remote areas, except for two. Your Alterant in Prime is in a basement, and in the Seventh, in the bottom floor of a parking garage. I left a couple of Sleeks in each of those locations to guard against potential intruders. As long as we stay on schedule, we should be okay.”

Mistress Jane nodded slowly, pleased. If Frazier was correct, all the pieces were in place and everything else was up to her. All she needed was the Blade Tree, her witnesses, a quick wink to where she needed to go, and a few minutes of the most intense concentration she would ever embark upon.

She stood from the chair and held a hand out to Frazier. “Then I think we’re ready to induce the Blade of Shattered Hope.”

Frazier took her hand without the slightest hesitation, even though the hideous scars and melded chunks of gold were plainly evident. His touch warmed her, and the fact that he had no reservations or prejudice against her new nature . . .

That meant something. She felt ashamed of how she’d treated him earlier.

“Frazier,” she said, pulling him up from the couch so he stood in front of her, just inches away. Her mask flowed into the most sincere smile she could conjure up in her mind. “You’ll be by my side when we do this. Agreed?”

A trickle of . . . something pricked her heart when she saw tears glisten his eyes.

“Yes, Mistress,” he said. “I’d be more honored than words can say.”

“Good. Then let’s go change the Realities once and for all.”

A Diabolical Plan

When Tick woke up, his parents had disappeared from the prison cell.

At first, he didn't quite notice, his mind still numb from sleep. Almost absently, he scanned the dimly lit room from left to right, expecting them to be *somewhere*. Huddled in a corner, maybe. Or hidden behind Master George, Paul, or Sofia, still dozing. Veiled in a shadow to which his eyes hadn't adjusted quite yet.

But then it hit him. They were gone.

His body jerked to full awareness like a bucket of water had been dumped on his head, and he jumped to his feet. "Where's my mom and dad? Where's my mom and dad!"

The others stirred, his shouts waking them.

"Huh?" Paul said groggily.

Sofia was looking around the room, much like he'd done just moments earlier. Master George grunted as he got to his feet, also searching with his eyes.

"Goodness gracious me," he said. "Where could they have gone off to?"

"We would've heard the door open," Sofia said. "No way we could've missed that."

That familiar panicky feeling threatened to consume Tick. "Where could they be?" He ran over to the bars of the cell, gripped his hands around the cold iron. "Mom! Dad! *Mooooom! Daaaaad!*"

First his sisters were taken, hidden in any one of who-knew-how-many horrible places. Now his parents were gone. "This can't be happening," he murmured, whispering it over and over. Then, "I'm gonna stop her. Once and for all, I'm gonna stop her."

"Calm down, Atticus," Master George said, hurrying to his side and placing a hand on his shoulder. "Remember the whole point of why Jane took your sisters. To *prevent* you from doing anything reckless."

For the first time since they'd left the basement of his house, Tick felt the surging boil of Chi'karda within him, burning and growing. But he also knew that Master George was right—he couldn't take a risk. Not now, not yet. Closing his eyes and concentrating with all his might, he pushed the power away, urged it to cool and dissolve.

"Why would she have taken my parents?" he asked when he felt the

episode was safely over. “Why now?”

“I’m sure we’ll find out soon enough,” Paul said. He stepped up next to Tick and squeezed his arm. “Sorry, dude. Seriously, though, we’ll figure this out. We’ve been in worse shape, haven’t we? We’re like superheroes, man—we’ll win this time, too.”

Sofia walked over and hugged Tick, squeezing him tightly. Surprised, it took him a second before he squeezed back.

“Paul’s an idiot,” she said as she let go and stepped back. “And he never knows how to say anything. But he’s right. We’ll get your family back, don’t worry. There’s no way she’ll . . . hurt them. Then she’d have nothing to threaten you with. I think she’s terrified of you.”

“Terrified?” a voice asked behind him.

Tick spun around to see Mistress Jane standing in the hallway, her red mask glaring at them with eyebrows raised.

“Where are they?” he shouted at her.

“They are safe for now,” she replied, her face melting back into that non-expression she wore most of the time. “I decided there were too many of you to keep track of. Plus, your parents have been winked to a different location than where your sisters are. I now have double collateral to hang over your head. I sense even a spark of Chi’karda surge out of you, and one of them dies. On and on until they’re all dead. If something bad happens to me, they all die at once. I trust you’ll not test me on this.”

Tick fumed more with every word that popped out of her mouth. It took all his concentration to keep the warmth from igniting to pure heat inside his chest. But he also felt a slight glimmer of hope. Based on what she’d said, it seemed like she couldn’t sense his surges of Chi’karda as long as he kept them at bay. Maybe, when the time was right, he could let the power build and build, unleashing it all in one powerful explosion before she could react or send a message to anyone.

What am I thinking? he thought. *I don’t even know what I’m talking about. I can’t control this stuff.* It was just as likely he’d kill himself and his friends as it was he’d kill Jane.

“I’ll take your silence as a sign that you understand the situation.” Jane’s arm shifted slightly, and the lock on the door sprung open with a loud click. The metal hinges groaned and squealed, and the door swung open. “And the same goes for any one of you. Try anything, and Tick’s family will suffer the consequences. If we run out of Higginbottoms, we’ll just have to do some hunting for Pacinis and Rogers. Or perhaps the tall ugly woman and her little pet, the ball of fat named Rutger. Do we all understand one another?”

When no one responded, Jane’s scream pierced the air like a burst of thunder. “*Answer me!*”

“Yes,” Tick said quickly, as did Paul and Sofia. The best she got out of Master George was a firm nod.

Jane stepped through the door and into the cell, standing very close to Tick. “We will be winking to a specific location here in the Thirteenth. Frazier has set up several spinners and monitors so all of you can best witness what happens today. When it’s over, you’ll spread the word, and we can begin the process of my taking over the Realities and putting the Utopia Initiative into full swing.”

Master George laughed, a slow, condescending chuckle. Tick braced himself for Jane’s reaction. He didn’t see what was funny. Though he didn’t know what she was talking about, her words had been like icy daggers scraping down his spine. She had something terrible planned, no doubt about it.

But Jane didn’t explode with her usual anger. “Laugh all you want, George. Giggle, chortle, snicker, whatever pleases you most. A couple of hours from now, when you see what I do, you may never make such jolly sounds ever again. The Blade of Shattered Hope, George. Soulikens. Dark Matter. These are things you aren’t even close to understanding yet.”

Master George’s face now showed no humor whatsoever. It burned red, almost as if he wore his own mask. “Words, Jane. Anyone can say fancy words, trying their best to sound smarter than others. You keep telling us you have this *diabolical* plan. Well, then, what is it?”

Jane paused before answering, the corners of her metallic lips curving upward slightly. “I’m going to destroy the Fifth Reality.”

Master George huffed. “Destroy it? What kind of nonsense is this? A mess of atomic bombs come across your path recently?”

Jane’s mask turned a darker shade of red, something Tick hadn’t thought possible. However, her expression didn’t change. It was still set in that mocking half-smile. For a long time, she just stared at Master George.

“Jane,” he finally said, “I worry your mind has slipped down a slope from which it can’t be saved.”

“You mistake my silence, George,” Jane replied. “I’m surprised, actually. I’m baffled that you could be so short-sighted. So . . . *stupid*.”

“What exactly is *that* supposed to mean?”

“Do you really not understand my power over Chi’karda? Even before my . . . *union* with the core of Dark Infinity, I almost had the ability to do what I plan for today. Now, it will be done with absolute certainty.”

“Well,” Sofia chimed in, “quit talking about it and tell us what your big bad plan is.”

Tick winced. She and Master George weren’t being smart about this. Couldn’t they see that Jane was deadly serious? Ticking her off even more

was a very, very bad idea. But when Jane responded, her voice was as calm and collected as anything Tick had ever heard come out of her mouth.

“The Blade of Shattered Hope will collect every souliken from my Alterants, channel them into the necessary components, and ignite the dark matter within. The Blade will then *slice* the Fifth Reality from existence. Forever.” She paused, then took a step forward. “Let me say it slowly for you, George. The Fifth will . . . be . . . no . . . more.”

Tale of the Iron Poker

As Sato devoured his third helping of the duck dumpling stew, he realized he'd gone at least five minutes without thinking about the whole nonsense of his Alterant being the ruler of a Reality before being murdered. There is something about tasty food that tends to wash your troubles away. And Tollaseat's food was, without hesitation or doubt, the most excellent stuff Sato had ever put in his mouth.

"This is good," he mumbled between bites, probably having said those three words a dozen times by now. "This is really good."

"Glad ya like it, I am." Tollaseat leaned back in his chair and puffed on his pipe. He'd lit it after eating only one helping, and seemed to be enjoying every second of watching Sato eat like a starved hyena.

"Quite good, it was," Mothball pitched in, folding her arms and looking very satisfied.

Surprisingly, even Rutger—who was propped up on at least three pillows and a very large book—was finished, wiping his mouth and laying the napkin on his bowl. "Sato, I had no idea you could stuff your face like that. You'd make my mama proud."

Windasill grinned as she leaned forward and reached for the ladle in the big pot of stew. "Care for another helping, Master Sato?"

Suddenly, as if a switch had been flicked inside of him, Sato realized he was terribly, horribly, awfully full. He dropped his spoon and looked up, hoping the feeling that he might explode at any second didn't show on his face. "No, thanks. I think I might've taken one bite too many."

"Oh, rubbish," she said through an exaggerated frown. "There's always room for more duck dumpling stew. Isn't there, my sweet?" She glanced over at Tollaseat.

Mothball's dad puffed out a big cloud of wispy smoke. "Methinks the lad's proven himself quite nicely, me love. Let him rest up an hour or two. Then we'll bring out the *desserts*." He emphasized the last word in a roar with his wide eyes twinkling. He put the pipe back into his mouth and chuckled lightly.

The thought of dessert almost put Sato over the edge. "Sounds great," he managed to get out.

"Tell us a story," Mothball said, looking at her dad. "Been quite some time

since we've 'eard you make somethin' up 'bout the war years, it 'as. Sato 'ere might enjoy your boastin' for awhile." She looked over at Sato and winked. "Won't quite know what's true and what's not, but it's fun to listen to, ya can trust me on that one."

Rutger pounded the table. "I second the motion. After a meal like that, a body needs to hear a good tale or two."

Tollaseat scrunched up his face into something very serious, looking around the room at each person in turn. "Wanna hear a story, do ya?"

"Yeah," Sato said at the same time as everyone else. He was surprised at himself, but he suddenly wanted nothing more than to hear this tall, kind man tell stories about the old days, even though those old days would be very different from days in Reality Prime.

Tollaseat leaned back, his chair creaking, and shifted so that the elbow supporting his pipe-holding hand rested on the other arm. He took a puff or two then started talking, swirls of wispy smoke slowly drifting toward the ceiling.

"Back when I was a wee lad, barely ten and six—that's sixteen to you, Master Sato—just when the growin' pains started stretching me arms and legs, life was sweet and terrible. Sweet in that me mum and dad were alive and well, the crops were growin' right sprightly, and I'd just met me future love"—he nodded toward Windasill—"at the August Festie. But it was terrible, too, yes indeed. That ruddy summer marked the worst we'd had yet with the Bugs, it did."

He coughed and reached out for a sip of water before taking another puff from his pipe. "Late one night, I was sleepin' nice and cozy in me bed, dreamin' of good days to come. Mayhaps dreamin' about Windasill, even. Most of the fightin' with them nasty Bugs was off in the far country, ya see—just frightenin' tales and rumors to the likes of us, it was. But we knew things were quite bad, and that blokes like myself might have to run off and get to soldierin' and whatnot. But that night, all was well when I put on me long johns and dozed to the soft sounds of the breeze and the stream out back.

"But then came the knock on the door." He leaned forward, putting his elbows on the table. "Woke me right up, it did. I remember sittin' up, perkin' me ears. Heard the footsteps of me dad, heard the door creak as it swung open, heard the murmurs of conversation, though I couldn't make out any words. Then . . ."

He trailed off, a glazed look coming over his face. Sato felt his own face redden in embarrassment. Maybe the old man—

Tollaseat slammed his hand against the table. Dishes rattled and his pipe went skittering across the floor. Windasill quickly jumped up to retrieve it and returned it to her husband. As she sat down again, Sato waited breathlessly for

what Tollaseat might say next.

“Can’t quite say what sound it was I ’eard next,” Mothball’s dad continued. “A groan. A sigh. Maybe a bit of a whimper. But for some reason, it sent me brain spinnin’ with alarm. I jumped from me bed and scrambled out to the main room. Right there in front of me, a ruddy Bugaboo was on top of me dad, his hands raised, claspin’ the biggest sword you ever did see. Mum came in right then and screamed a sound you’d never believe ’less your own ears were there to ’ear it. If I’m honest with ya, which I am, ’twas that sound—me mum splinterin’ the air with all the anguish in the world—that made me move. Even more than seein’ me dad ’bout to meet the pointy end of a sword.”

Sato leaned forward, sure he’d never been so captivated in his life.

Tollaseat barely paused between sentences now. “Acted, I did. Ran straight for the hearth—the ashes still glowin’ hot—grabbed the iron poker me own Uncle Kent forged, gripped it with both of me ruddy hands, swung it up, and charged that Bug. Saw the fear in that loonie’s eyes. Saw them widen and turn into pools of pure white. He started to say somethin’, started to move, started to swing down with his arms and his sword. I screamed and swung that blessed iron poker. I swung it with every bit of strength cloggin’ me pores and joints. I swung it straight for the Bug’s face.”

He paused then and took a long pull on his pipe. Scanning Sato and the others at the table, he finally blew out a stream of smoke. He looked down at the table, his eyes full of shadowy memories.

“What happened?” Sato whispered, unable to help himself.

Tollaseat, still staring at the empty plate in front of him, answered in a haunted voice. “I missed him. Completely missed the ruddy buzzard.”

Sato swallowed heavily, slumping in his chair.

“Killed me dad, the Bug did.” Tollaseat finally glanced up, his gaze resting on Sato. “But I saved me mum. I was able to run off the Bug. Swore the rest of me life to hunt them down, one by one, ’til every last one of them buggers was dead and rottin’.”

The pipe went back into his mouth, and complete silence settled on the room. After a long minute, Sato looked at Mothball, her eyes moistened with tears, and then at Rutger, who was probably unaware he was still nibbling a biscuit. Both of them were staring at Tollaseat. After a moment, it became evident the story was over.

“Thank you for sharing, dear,” Windasill said, patting her husband on the arm. “’Eard it a thousand times, I ’ave, but I marvel at your courage every time. Never forget you saved your mum that day, dear. Never forget.”

“Wish I could’ve met Grandpa,” Mothball said, a choking clog in her voice. “But ’tweren’t for you, Daddy, I wouldn’t’ve spent me whole

childhood with Grandma. Thanks be to ya, Daddy. Thanks be to ya very much.”

Sato was stunned. He’d expected a story more along the lines of a fairy tale, maybe a funny or an embarrassing moment. But Tollaseat had just shared probably the most terrifying, pivotal moment of his life. And Sato had absolutely no idea what to say. He stared at his plate, feeling the heavy weight of all the food he’d eaten.

“Right cheerful, don’t ya think?” Tollaseat said, a smile breaking through the gloom on his face. “Not quite sure why I told that story. Meant to tell somethin’ else, I did. But it just popped out of me mouth.”

“Important we remember,” Mothball offered, giving her mom an uncomfortable look.

“Yes, me sweet,” Tollaseat replied. “Reckon I wanted Master Sato ’ere to understand why them Bugs aren’t just a joke, even though they look it. Crazy, they are. Vicious little rats. But underestimate ’em, and you’ll be lookin’ up at ten feet of dirt soon, you will. Be wary while you’re about these parts, is all I’m sayin’.”

Sato merely nodded, still unable to speak. He didn’t know why, exactly, but that story had touched him, made his heart ache with sorrow. And then it hit him why.

Sato, too, had seen his father killed right in front of him. Burned to death by Mistress Jane’s flying flames. Maybe that was worse than seeing your dad stabbed by a sword. Maybe not. It didn’t matter. Something came over him in that moment.

He stood up. “Mister, um, Master . . . Tollaseat?”

Mothball’s dad lowered his pipe, looked at Sato with dark eyes, and Sato somehow knew the old man had already figured out what he was about to say.

“I want to help,” Sato said, trying to sound like an adult and hoping no one laughed. “I want to help your people fight the Bugs.”

Towers of Red

Tick,” Master George whispered. “I need you to listen to me very carefully. And do me a favor.”

Jane had brought them to a room several levels above the prison cell in which they’d been held captive. She’d left a couple of guards at the door. The creatures in full armor were human in shape but all comparisons ended there. Tick hadn’t gotten a good look, but he swore he saw horns or tusks coming out of their shadow-hidden faces and large bulges on their backs.

“What?” Tick asked.

In response, Master George handed him a small, metal tube.

“What’s this?”

“What do you *think*?”

Tick looked over at Paul and Sofia, hoping they were listening. But both of them were trying to look through a grime-covered window. “Is it a message for somebody?”

“Precisely,” George whispered.

“For who?” Tick asked. “And what do you want me to do?”

“It’s a message for Sally. It’s short, but he should get the point. I want him to gather the Realitants so they’ll be ready on a moment’s notice. For what, I have no idea—but he needs to get them to headquarters straightaway.”

That made perfect sense to Tick, but he had a bad feeling about this all the same. “And . . . what does that have to do with me?”

Master George looked at him, his eyes shifting slightly back and forth.

“Well, er, well, I need you to . . . wink it to Sally.”

“*What?*” Tick rasped, way too loudly.

Sofia noticed. “What are you guys talking about over there?”

“Never you mind,” Master George answered, surprisingly harsh.

Sofia, of course, completely ignored him and walked over, dragging Paul with her. “No secrets, boss. What’s going on?”

Tick couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen Master George look so perplexed. His face was red, eyes darting around the room, sweat trickling down his temples. “Someone’s going to *hear* us!” he exclaimed in a half-shout, half-whisper.

Tick didn’t like it that Master George had asked him to use his power in

the first place. Only a half an hour ago, Jane had threatened to kill his family one by one if she sensed him using Chi'karda. "How am I supposed to wink the message? Even if I could, even if I had a clue how to do it, I can't risk Jane finding out."

"Yes, yes, I *know*," Master George said, throwing all the frustration he could into the last word. "But perhaps you can risk it when she's . . . occupied with whatever she has planned. If we don't gather the other Realitants to help us, it may all be quite moot anyway."

Tick slid the message tube into his pocket. The old Brit was being coy, but Tick knew exactly what he was *really* trying to say. "So you think it's okay to sacrifice my family for the greater good. Let them die if it'll save the world. Worlds. Whatever." Tick couldn't believe how bitter he sounded. To make it worse, Master George had a *point*. But not one Tick could accept.

For the hundredth time, he felt an overwhelming, gloomy sorrow squeeze his chest and lungs. His sisters. His mom and dad. Jane had them. No matter what, he had to save them. No matter what.

But how?

"Tick?" Sofia asked, jolting him back to reality. "You okay? What does he want you to do?"

"We need to stop talking about this," Master George said. "Right now!"

"Dude," Paul said, "what are you two freaks talking about?"

Tick looked at him and shook his head. "It's nothing—George just wants to get a message to Sally." He turned his attention back to Master George. "Don't you have a way of talking to him? Through your nanolocator or something?"

Master George shook his head. "I think she's done something to us. Shielded us somehow. I've tried making contact several times. Nothing."

"Since when is Sally in charge?" Paul asked. "Rutger finally explode or something?"

"Maybe he ate one of his own Ragers," Sofia added.

By the looks of it, Master George was not amused. He turned his back to the three of them and walked over to a corner.

Sofia elbowed Paul in the arm. "Way to go, smarty."

"You, too, Godzilla," he replied. "Your comment was worse than mine."

Tick couldn't remember a time when he'd been *less* in the mood to listen to his friends fight. "Guys! You think this is all some kind of stupid joke?" As soon as the words were out, he regretted them. Especially when he saw the look on their faces—shock, mixed with a little hurt.

"What crawled up your pants and started biting?" Paul asked.

"Tick's right," Sofia said, her eyes never leaving Tick's. "His family's been

taken. I can't imagine . . . what that must be like. We need to take things more seriously."

She looked away, and Tick saw an expression he couldn't quite identify come over her face. Regret? Longing? Whatever it was, it was something to do with *her*, not him. He thought about all her comments in the past, the subtle remarks here and there about her family—none of them very nice. Maybe she was wishing she had parents and siblings whom, if taken, she'd worry about as much as he was worried about his. The twisted thought added to his sadness.

"Well, we still have to be ourselves," Paul said. "Tick, dude, sorry, but if we get all mopey, then we might as well just give up and die. You know I don't think this is all a joke, man. Give me a break."

Tick looked at him, surprised at the angry tone of his voice. Paul was always laid back, taking what came at him. Even his sparring words with Sofia were always filled with obvious jest.

Tick shook his head. "Okay, whatever. This is all stupid anyway. We're sitting here in a soap opera while Jane's planning something *diabolical*. What are we gonna do?"

Master George was still in the corner, but he turned around to face them. "We need to stay on our guard and look for the first opportunity that comes along. I've no idea what that may be, and I've no idea what we'll do. But something will come along, and we *must* be ready."

"What about Tick's family?" Sofia asked.

Tick had been wondering the same thing, but reality hit him then. He didn't know what it was—maybe it was the distressed look on Master George's face, maybe it was something in what he'd said. Either way, Tick realized a heavy truth. This wasn't just about him and his parents and his sisters. Jane was planning the single worst thing to ever happen to humans in the history of the universe. At least, that's what it sounded like. Her plan involved destroying an entire world full of people.

Could he really put his family above that? If it really came down to choosing between them and dozens, hundreds, thousands, even millions of lives, what would he do? What *should* he do?

He wanted to scream. No one should have to make decisions like this, especially not a fourteen-year-old kid. In that instant, his hatred for Jane changed into something more powerful, more acute. Every single molecule in his body wanted her dead.

"Tick?" Paul asked. "What are you staring at?"

Tick realized his eyes were focused on a greasy, dark smear on the stone on the opposite wall. He shook his head, scrambling the thoughts in his mind. "Sorry. Just thinking."

Master George walked back to him and the others. He held a hand out and squeezed Tick's shoulder. "Master Atticus. I give you my word that I will do everything in my power to help save your family. I will give my life, if necessary. But in return, you must promise me that you'll look at the bigger picture and do whatever it takes to stop Jane before she does something apocalyptic. I know her, my good man, and when she says she'll destroy the Fifth Reality, she means it. She has no reason to boast with lies. We're talking about billions of lives, Atticus. Billions."

Tick couldn't meet his gaze. He couldn't promise himself or anyone else that he'd be able to make the right choice if it came down to that. All he could see in his mind were his parents, Lisa, and . . .

Kayla. Thinking of little Kayla just about shattered his heart.

Unable to do anything else, he nodded.

"Very well," Master George said. "We can only take things step by—"

tingle

"—step."

In the small blip of time between his last two words, everything changed. As Tick was looking at their leader and listening to him speak, he felt the familiar tingle shoot down the back of his neck. The room around them disappeared, replaced by red rock.

He noticed the others spin around, just as he did, to see where Jane had brought them with her strange winking powers. They were in the middle of a desert, towering spires of stone standing all around them, jutting up from a natural rock wall that more or less encircled them. Tick couldn't see one plant, not one weed, or anything close to the color green or even brown. Everything was reddish-orange, jagged and rough, all sharp corners and cracks and crevices. Desolation.

The sun was behind a massive tower of stone, but the heat was suffocating. Tick already felt himself sweating.

"I don't see any tombstones," Paul muttered, and Tick couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic or making a very good point.

"Realities help us," Master George said. "If she can wink people to anywhere she wants so easily . . . Let's hope a lot of poor saps were killed here at some point in history."

"That's a cheerful thought," Sofia said.

Just then, Mistress Jane appeared in front of them. As always with winking, there was no puff of smoke, no flash of light or sound. One second she wasn't there, and the next second she was, dressed in her usual yellow garb and her shiny red mask. Her face was pulled into a genuine smile. It gave Tick the creeps.

"Looks like I miscalculated a bit," she said. "Guess I'm not perfect after

all. We need to be on the other side of that.”

She pointed at the stone face to their right. The wall was maybe forty feet high, with several spires of rock stretching toward the sky from its top edge. Though it had a menacing feel to it, the slope didn't seem too steep, and Tick thought they could probably climb it pretty easily.

“Follow me,” Jane said as she headed in that direction, lifting up the bottom folds of her robe as she walked and carefully avoiding chunks of rock strewn about the desert floor. “And remember, Atticus—don't try anything.”

When neither Tick nor anyone else made a move, Jane stopped. Her body stiffened, and some kind of unspoken warning seemed to flow from her, back at them like a misty spray of poison. She didn't need to say a word.

As one, Tick and his friends stepped forward and followed her.

The Black Tree

The heat was stifling, an invisible fire that suffused the air of the world, filling Tick's lungs with every breath he took. Once they reached the slope of the red wall, he realized it was much steeper than it had originally looked. Amazed at how easily Jane scooted up its face, he determined to do just as well.

Grabbing rocks that blistered with heat and finding footholds aplenty in the cracked and creviced stone, he found climbing wasn't so bad. About halfway up the wall, he looked down to see Paul and Sofia right below him. Master George was struggling a little, mainly because he was trying to keep his suit from getting dirty, but the darker patches of sweat under his arms revealed that his suit would need a good wash anyway—though Tick doubted they'd be seeing a Laundromat on the other side of this wall.

What am I thinking about? Tick asked himself as he continued to climb. Laundry? Sweaty armpits? He needed to stay focused.

Jane reached the top ridge above him and disappeared from sight, kicking a trickle of rocks down the slope with her last steps. Tick squeezed his eyes shut until the rocks passed; a couple of pebbles nicked his forehead. He pulled himself up the last few feet and stood on the top edge of the wall, taking in the sight before him. Sofia thumped the back of his leg.

"Scoot over, Tick," she said. "Give us some room here."

Tick stepped forward, too focused on the strange setting below him to respond to Sofia. The ground slowly sloped from where he stood, leading to a wide depression surrounded by squat, scraggly trees that barely clung to life, their sparse leaves more brown than green. Scattered across the dusty ground of the natural bowl formation were several groups of people, each group focusing and working on various stations that couldn't possibly have looked more out of place.

Computers and monitors covered tables scattered around the ground. Other platforms held large, silver machines he'd never seen before, each one loaded with odd appendages and dials and switches. Several viewing screens had been set up, tall and square and white, perched precariously on metal stands. Tick feared the slightest wind would topple them over. In the middle of each screen, Tick saw something he recognized: a small metal rod attached with a suction cup.

Spinners. Devices from the Fourth Reality, spinners used some kind of laser technology to project pictures and video. Jane had said she wanted them to witness something, but Tick hadn't thought they'd be watching it like *that*.

Sofia and Paul were standing next to him now, scanning the area as he was. Master George finally made it to the ridge as well. Tick heard him grunting and gasping for breath behind them.

"What's that in the middle?" Paul asked, pointing.

Tick looked, and when he saw what Paul was pointing at, he couldn't believe he'd missed it before.

It was a statue of a tree, maybe four feet tall, and made of the blackest material Tick had ever seen. There was no blemish to its darkness, no dust, no flash of light or reflection. Every inch of it was pure black. The trunk of the tree was about a foot thick, and its limbs shot off starting halfway up, branching out over and over until the outermost tips were as thin as toothpicks.

"That's plain weird," Sofia said.

"What could she possibly be doing with all this junk?" Paul asked. "Especially a stupid sculpture of a tree?"

Master George had finally caught his breath. "Whatever that tree is, I suspect it's the most important thing down there. It gives me a very bad feeling."

"It's so black it doesn't seem real," Sofia said.

Tick noticed Jane had walked all the way down to the outermost group of people next to a row of computers but was now coming back. Her red mask still had that creepy smile, like she was a kid at Disneyland and having the time of her life.

"Come down!" she called. "I've got chairs for you!"

Tick exchanged looks with Paul and Sofia. Jane sounded way too cheerful, way too nice. That scared Tick almost more than when she screamed at the top of her lungs.

"Off we go," Master George whispered, giving the three of them a gentle push from behind.

When they made it to the bottom, Jane gestured toward a man holding four folding chairs in his hands, two in each. He had black hair and unusually thin eyebrows, and he wore a faded red T-shirt and jeans. As he started setting up the chairs, Jane introduced him.

"This is Frazier Gunn, my most loyal servant. He'll be in charge of ensuring you all witness today's events. I'll be too busy to see to it myself. But let me make this clear—if you cooperate, no harm will come to you or the Higginbottom family. However, one sign of trouble, and Frazier . . . has his orders."

Tick's hatred for her burned inside him, and he had to suppress a rising tide of Chi'karda. He pushed it away, feeling an icy chill settle in his gut. Completely dejected, he numbly walked to one of the chairs and sat down, saying nothing, ignoring everybody. All he could see in his mind were images of his family.

"That's the spirit," Jane said. "The rest of you sit down. The show will begin shortly."

"What *is* the show?" Master George asked, not having moved an inch at her command.

"Sit, George," Jane replied. "You'll see soon enough."

Paul and Sofia sat down on either side of Tick, their faces looking half confused and half angry, and maybe a little curious as well. Tick couldn't help but wonder what they were thinking. If the roles were reversed, would he think them selfish if they refused to fight Jane because they didn't want to risk the lives of their families? He hoped not.

"Hey," Paul whispered as he leaned toward him. "Look at that tree. It almost looks like it's made of liquid or something. Does funny things to my eyes when I stare at it."

Tick moved his eyes in that direction. The black sculpture was fascinating this close up. The tree was deeply dark, its details crisp, the edges finer than they naturally should be. Every branch, from the thick parts where they connected to the trunk to the needle-thin tips, which looked sharp enough to impale rock, almost seemed to move in an unseen breeze, tricking his vision as he scanned the sculpture from top to bottom, side to side.

"It *is* weird," he finally said to Paul.

He felt like he wasn't looking at something in the real world. It reminded him more of animation, something done with the most advanced computer technology available. It made him queasy; he finally looked away. Jane's workers bustled about the area, checking dials and switches, typing on keyboards, adjusting the screens. But no one came within a few feet of the black tree. No one even appeared to look at it.

Maybe they are as terrified of it as we are, Tick thought. What could it possibly be?

Actually, one person *was* looking at it. Jane stood on the edge of the temporary complex, almost hidden from his sight by one of those movie screens. Arms folded, her mask showing that unreadable expression, she seemed to be concentrating on the tree. Tick would've given anything to see her real face at that moment, or better yet, to read her thoughts. What was going on here?

"Tick," Sofia said quietly.

"What?" He cringed—he hadn't meant to sound so harsh.

Sofia's head snapped around to glare at him. "Okay, you know what, *Atticus*? I know they have your family, and I know you're stressed to the max. But being rude to us isn't gonna help anybody."

Tick knew she was right, and for about three seconds hated her for it. "Sorry," he finally muttered.

"It's fine. Listen, what can you do with this power of yours? The *Chi'karda*. We haven't really had much chance to talk about it."

Paul leaned forward to put his elbows on his knees, looking their way. "Yeah, man, it seems like you learned a lot more about it since last time you gave us an update on e-mail."

Tick shook his head. He didn't really want to talk about it, but he forced himself to do it, hoping he could get his mind off his family. "It's crazy. I feel this really warm burning in my chest, like hot air is swirling around in there. In my basement, I concentrated on it, tried to picture things in my mind. Like it was something I could grab with my hands—my pretend hands, I guess. Then I threw it at her. It was all mental—just like acting out images in my head."

"I couldn't really tell what was happening," Sofia said. "I felt something, like a big surge of energy or electricity. And I could tell Jane was struggling against an invisible wall of whatever. But it wasn't like you were shooting balls of fire."

"Yeah," Paul added. "Why can't you just shoot balls of fire? That'd be nice."

Tick ignored that, trying to decide if he dared say what he'd just thought. "Well, there might be something."

Sofia gave him a puzzled look. "What?"

"You know how she keeps saying she can sense when I use the *Chi'karda*?"

Sofia and Paul both nodded.

"I think she might be bluffing."

"Really?" Paul asked. "Why?"

Tick tapped his chest. "There have been a few times when it swelled up inside me, and I had to fight it off. She never said a word about it."

"Maybe she can't sense it unless you actually use it," Sofia suggested. "Or throw it, or whatever it is you do."

"Yeah," Tick said. "Still, maybe I can play with it a little bit. Test it out a little and see if she says anything. I bet she'd give me a warning before she actually did something to my family."

Paul grunted. "Dude, you sure you wanna risk that?"

Tick looked at him, surprised at how glad he was Paul had asked that. He

hoped Sofia felt the same. He hoped they understood how careful he had to be.

“No, but I think I have to try. Next time I can trigger something in here”—he tapped his chest again—“I’ll try it a little.”

Sofia looked like she was about to respond when a loud humming sound cut her off.

Tick’s hands instinctively covered his ears. It wasn’t so much the volume of the sound as the *vibration* of it. A deep, thrumming toll, like a massive bell had been struck just feet away. The noise had an underlying buzz, too, as if the same bell had upset a nest of gigantic wasps.

“What is that?” Paul shouted.

Tick didn’t know for sure, but it seemed like the source of the horrible sound was coming from . . .

He saw dust and pebbles bouncing on the ground. He had no doubt. It was coming from the black tree.

Disturbances

It took a lot of persuading, but Sato finally convinced Mothball and Rutger to accept Tollaseat's offer to stay overnight and return to headquarters the next morning. They were anxious to get back and hear about the results of some secret meeting Master George had run off to, but agreed that one night wouldn't hurt.

But the promise of a warm fire in a cozy house, and the promise of more desserts from Tollaseat—maybe even a story or two—sealed the deal. And Sato loved the idea of sleeping in one of the gigantic—and soft—beds upstairs. His cot back in the Bermuda Triangle always made him feel like he'd slept on a concrete floor.

They'd just sat down in the living room, plates of cheesecake balanced on their laps, cups of hot tea steaming on the end tables, and a large fire crackling in the brick hearth, when Rutger brought up for the tenth time what Sato had said earlier about wanting to help in the fight against the Bugaboo soldiers.

"What made you say that?" the man asked, not caring that his mouth was full of cake. "You were just being nice, right?"

"I thought it a very kind gesture, indeed," Windasill said. She held her cup right below her lips and blew across the hot tea.

"Why do you keep asking me about it?" Sato turned to Rutger. "It just ticks me off that they've done so many bad things. I want to help. Why is that so hard for you to get?"

"I just meant—"

"Isn't that what we're about?" Sato snapped. "The Realitants? Aren't we supposed to help people?"

Rutger's eyes widened in surprise. "Well, yes. Of course it is."

"Then quit asking." Sato forked a bite of cheesecake into his mouth, then took a sip from his cup.

He had no idea why he felt so edgy and irritated. He shouldn't feel embarrassed that the real reason he wanted to help was because of Tollaseat's story about watching his own father be killed. No one had been there to help Sato when the same tragedy had happened to him. He felt obligated, but not in a forceful, guilty way. It was more that he felt a connection to Tollaseat that wouldn't go away.

For the first time, his feelings solidified into one easy statement in his mind: He wanted revenge. And by fighting the Bugs who had killed Tollaseat's father and were connected with the woman who had killed his own father, maybe he could find it.

"Sorry, Sato," Rutger said. "I didn't mean it as an insult. The opposite, actually. I was impressed, and that made me curious as to what was behind it. I'll shut up now."

"That'd be perfect," Sato said, trying to soften his words with a smile, trying to return to the good mood of his earlier determination to fight the Bugs and his excitement at spending the night in the Fifth Reality. "Seriously, I mean it, though. Tollaseat, I'm going to get permission from George to come back and help. Whatever I can do."

Tollaseat bowed his head in a deep nod. "I'm quite honored, Master Sato. I'll ask around town for ways you . . ."

He trailed off, slowly lowering his cup back to the small table next to his chair. He looked confused.

"What is it, dear?" Windasill asked.

"What?" He focused on her. "Oh, well, I just had a thought. People will see that Sato here is a dead ringer for our deceased leader. Don't know how we can get around that."

"Makes a good point, he does," Mothball said. "Sato, not sure we can be doin' that. Quite risky. Might make folks talk and wonder."

Sato couldn't believe he hadn't thought of that very problem. How would that work to have someone come along who was the Alterant of your dead leader? He felt a pit of disappointment open up in his stomach.

"No matter," Tollaseat said, waving his hand in the air. "Think on it, no rush. Things have been quite cool of late, not too many problems with the ruddy Bugs. Mayhaps when you get a bit older, look a bit different, when it's . . . less obvious you're not from these parts and couldn't be him."

Rutger suddenly chuckled.

"What's so funny?" Mothball asked.

Rutger shrugged. "Could be quite a sight. Those clowns seeing their victim come back from the dead. Maybe they'd—"

A loud, horrible crash and the crunch of shattered glass cut him off. Sato jumped up, looking over in time to see hundreds of shards from the big window that overlooked the front yard blow inward, the glass bouncing and clinking off furniture as it fell to the floor.

Mothball's mom yelped; Tollaseat called out something, but Sato couldn't tell what he'd said. Rutger, who had been the closest to the window, seemed too shocked to move. Pieces of glass glittered in his hair and on his shoulders.

Everyone stared at the empty window as if waiting for someone to jump up and explain what had happened. In the silence, Sato heard the distant sounds of glass breaking in other parts of the house. Then, from outside, came a low, repeating pulse of noise, some kind of deep buzz or static, surging in short waves. He almost *felt* it more than heard it with his ears.

“What’s going on?” Sato asked. “What is that noise?”

“No ruddy idea,” Mothball answered.

The sound grew and intensified, making Sato’s head hurt. “What shou—”
He fell to the floor as the whole house started to shake and tremble.

~

Tick sat still, transfixed by the humming, throbbing black tree. Its waves of energy were almost visible to some sixth sense he didn’t quite understand. Since the noise had started, none of his friends had said a word, and Tick was sure they were as mesmerized and scared as he was.

The man Jane had called Frazier Gunn was walking from screen to screen, flicking the thin metal bar of each spinner that was attached to the exact center. He moved on without even waiting to make sure the spinner worked. As if by magic, and certainly by a technology Tick didn’t understand, the metal rods spun faster and faster, despite the seeming lack of any motor.

A shimmering silver disk, maybe four inches wide, appeared. Once the spinner hit full speed, a much larger, red-tinted projection shot out, creating a wide, hazy circle that covered most of the screen behind it. Only the white corners of the squares were visible. Tick knew that soon those red circles would turn into video feeds, as clear in quality as any movie he’d ever seen.

Just as Frazier flicked the last spinner, Mistress Jane came over to Tick and the others, seemingly done with whatever she’d been doing to make the menacing black tree hum as it did. She stopped a few feet in front of their line of chairs, her red mask looking somewhat weary. She stared directly at Tick.

“I’m going to explain everything to you,” she said, her voice tight. Strained. “And this isn’t some example of the bad guys telling the good guys the whole *diabolical* plan just in time for them to escape and save the day. No, I *want* you to know. Every last detail. Once you do, and once you witness the extent of my power, I’ll set you free so you can tell the other Realitants and spread the word throughout each world. Everyone must know what I’m capable of, and the reasons why it must happen.”

She paused, and the eyes of her mask, dark and deep, never wavered from Tick. “Correction. I’m going to set *most* of you free to spread the word. Atticus stays with me.”

Tick stood up, not sure where the courage came from. “What? Why? You promised you’d let me and my family go if I didn’t try to stop you.”

Jane’s scarred hand shot out from beneath the folds of her robe, her palm

outward. At the same instant, Tick flew backward, hit by an unseen force that thumped him in the chest. He fell into his chair and toppled over, banging his head against the dusty, hard ground. Shaking it off, he scrambled to his feet and picked up his chair. Glaring at Jane, he took a seat, hating himself for being such a wimp. Not an ounce of Chi'karda flickered inside him.

Jane's mask was a sneer. "I never made any such promise of letting *you* free, Atticus. Only your family. Now stay silent, or I'll get rid of one of your sisters."

Tick gripped the sides of his chair to stop his hands from shaking. He had to do something. This wasn't right, letting this woman treat them this way. He had to do something!

Jane continued with her speech as if nothing had happened. "What you'll be witnessing today is the first fully functional use of the most mysterious substance in the universe. Most scientists throughout the Realities don't even know what it *is*, much less how to use it."

"What are you talking about?" Master George said.

Jane didn't take her eyes off Tick, answering her former boss without so much as the courtesy of a glance. "George, as usual, you speak to me with your condescending, I-know-more-than-you-do arrogance. Now shut up."

Tick looked over at Master George, shocked at how childishly rude Jane's command had been. The old man glowered, his face redder than ever, his lips quivering despite being pressed together so hard they were almost white. But he didn't say anything.

"The Blade Tree before you," Jane continued, her expression still angry, "is made from the substance I was trying to tell you about before being so rudely interrupted. No tool of modern science could've accomplished such a thing as creating this object, I assure you. It took my ever-growing skills—fostered from my connection with the Thirteenth Reality—along with the additional powers granted to me by being unified with Chu's Dark Infinity, and an understanding of physics only my innate brilliance combined with a lifetime of study could accomplish."

She leaned closer to Tick. "Think on this, Atticus. As great as my gifts over Chi'karda have become, I could not have done this without the catalyst and boosting power of Chu's failed mechanism. In many ways, you are my partner. Think on that as you see what's about to happen."

She knelt down before him, reached out her disgusting right hand, and placed it on Tick's knee. Even through his jeans, he could feel the roughness of her palm, the tiny pricks of metal jutting out from her skin. Though every instinct told him to get up, scream, and run as far away as possible, he refused to cower away from her.

Jane's mask melted and flowed into an evil grin.

“Yes, Atticus,” she said in a mockingly gentle voice. “Think on what you did to me as you watch billions of people in the Fifth Reality die.”

Tick had hoped deep down that she hadn’t meant it when she’d said her plan was to destroy an entire planet. But the demented tone of her next statement erased all doubt—and hope.

“Billions, Atticus. Billions.”

The Unleashing

The constant, terrible, pulsing waves of sound increased in volume, rattling Sato's skull as the earthquake's intensity slowly escalated.

He crawled toward Windasill, unable to get back to his feet. The house shook like a ship at sea, thrown about by massive waves and wind. Things crashed all around them: lamps, dishes, picture frames, decorative trinkets of glass. Their remains littered the floor, sharp and vicious. Sato picked through the wreckage, ignoring the pricks of pain, the feel of moistness on his palms. He refused to look down, hoping it was sweat, not blood.

He'd seen Windasill fall but hadn't heard a peep from her since. With no idea where Mothball, Rutger, and Tollaseat had gone off to, Sato could only think to try to help where he could. Windasill.

He rounded an overturned cabinet, the large wooden drawers spilling out. Windasill was on the floor, lying on her side, a trickle of blood running from her mouth. Her eyes were closed, but her chest rose and fell with deep breaths.

"Windasill!" he yelled. When she didn't respond, he lurched forward. He felt like he was trying to move with three extra arms and legs. Thumping to the floor next to her, he smashed his nose against the ground. Somehow, despite the world shaking all around him, he got his arms around her and lifted her head into his lap as he sat up.

"Windasill!" he shouted again.

A moan escaped her, and her eyes flickered open. "What's happening?" she whispered.

Sato wouldn't have understood if he hadn't been able to see her lips mouth the words. "I don't know!" he shouted back. "I—"

"Sato!"

Mothball's voice. He turned his head to see her and Rutger at the front door, the two of them clutching the doorframe as their bodies swayed back and forth, constantly bumping into each other. He could see past them to the trees whipping in the wind. The sky was dark, only a few stars barely bright enough to flicker.

How had he gotten here? He thought he'd been moving toward the kitchen, toward the back of the house. "Where's your dad?" he yelled, completely disoriented.

“Out in the yard! Come on!” Mothball let go of the doorframe and stumbled toward him, her tall body losing the balance battle as she toppled to the floor, almost on top of her mom. She quickly got her hands and feet under her and began helping him with Windasill.

Like three drunken sailors, they got up, shuffled to the door, glass crunching under their feet with every heavy step. Rutger did what he could, reaching out and holding onto clothes, pulling, pushing. Soon they were all outside, where at least the danger of a house falling down on top of them was eliminated.

Sato drew in ragged breaths, his chest heaving as he released Windasill into Mothball’s care. He spread his feet in the grass of the front yard, putting his hands on his knees to keep his balance as best he could. The earthquake rumbled on, distant sounds of destruction wafting through the night: crunching wood and breaking glass, alarms blaring and people screaming.

Sato couldn’t believe what he was seeing. The trees seemed to be jumping up and down. The yard looked like a bed of thin grass growing on a lake, rippling in waves that made him queasy. The road and driveway did the same, cracking and crumpling.

Through it all, suffusing it all, was that sound, thrumming and humming and buzzing, like horns and bees and gongs amplified a thousand fold. Sato’s head felt split in two, pain lancing into his eyeballs. He’d lived in Japan most of his life and endured a dozen or so earthquakes. But nothing like this. Not even close.

All he could think was that the world was coming to an end.

~

“Dark Matter,” Jane said after letting her statement about killing billions of people sink in. She was acting as though she’d merely announced she was having layoffs at the fangen factory. Tick realized he was more scared of Jane’s insanity than he was of her powers over Chi’karda.

“What do you mean, *dark matter*?” Master George asked. “You can’t possibly expect me to believe your fancy tree statue is made of dark matter. Impossible. Utterly impossible, and you’ve now proven yourself quite mad. As if we needed any further proof on the matter.”

“Dark matter,” Jane repeated, as if she hadn’t heard Master George. “It makes up more than seventy percent of the universe and yet, until recently, no one could determine its nature. I’ll spare you hours of lecture and say this—by combining the powers of Chi’karda with the non-baryonic dark energy, I can eliminate the electromagnetic forces holding the Fifth Reality together. I can ignite extreme entropy. In other words, I can dissolve it into floating atomic gunk.”

Tick knew a little about dark matter, mostly from a couple of books he’d

read. But they had been science fiction stories that didn't really explain what it was exactly, just made up some cool uses for it. Destructive uses. Cataclysmic destruction. If Jane was serious about what she could do with it .

..

“The connections between my dark matter components are already strengthening, channeling through the hub of the black tree, magnified by my Alterants, each one of whom is set up in her own Reality, in these same coordinates. The soulikens are strong in these Alterants of mine, just as I knew they would be. Our genetic makeup is almost perfectly compatible. Any one of them could have done what I have done in the Thirteenth, if only they'd been given the opportunity.”

Her voice grew quiet. “The Chi'karda is flowing, my friends, flowing on a scale I doubt you could scarcely comprehend. Soon the dark matter will be linked, and the Blade will do its slicing.”

Dark matter. Alterants. Soulikens. Chi'karda. Blade. Jane's words bounced around inside Tick's mind, trying to sort themselves into something that made sense. But it wasn't working. He felt completely confused and out of his league. Jane was up to something monstrous.

Mistress Jane finally looked away from Tick, taking in each of his friends one by one with her mad gaze. Then she settled back on him. “I don't expect you to comprehend the workings of the Blade of Shattered Hope. Just know this, and know it well so you can spread the word: the Blade is a series of dark matter components, linked by my Alterants to create the greatest flow of Chi'karda since the beginning of time and space. And when I tap into that power and give the order to *sever* the Fifth Reality, the dark matter will consume the Fifth like a black hole. The Fifth will cease to exist—along with every man, woman, child, beast, insect, and plant living there. *That* is what you are about to witness.”

Tick couldn't hold back anymore. “How can you do something like this? You're always spewing this garbage about wanting to do good, but now you suddenly think it's okay to kill billions of people?”

“Yes, Atticus, you're absolutely correct.”

She turned and motioned to the closest screen, where moving images had now appeared in the spinner's projected circle. A woman sat huddled on another odd black sculpture—this one had a solid top and bottom connected by dozens of curved, twisty rods. The lady was dirty and appeared to be terrified and hungry, but Tick could tell she was an Alterant of Jane. He remembered his time with the “real” Jane at Chu's mountainous palace. This lady had the same black hair, the same eyes, the same face.

Tick looked at the other screens and saw similar video feeds. More Alterants, more black sculptures. Each woman had her own unique attributes,

but there was enough there to see that all of them were Jane's inter-Reality twins. In one of the video feeds, the image shook, as if the person holding the camera was doing some kind of jig. The Alterant was screaming uncontrollably, trying to free herself from the chains binding her to the dark black object below her. Then the other video feeds started to shake as well, one by one, worsening every time Tick looked at a new screen.

"I've learned my lesson," Jane said, "about walking softly and kindly as I try to achieve my dream of a Utopian Reality. I'll tread lightly no longer. The people of the Fifth will die, yes, but it is for the good of mankind. In the long run, we will all be eternally grateful for their sacrifice."

Master George's whole body trembled with rage. "How could even your twisted, sickened mind stretch a tragedy of such proportions to something that will achieve good? You've lost your soul, Jane."

Jane's hand whipped out again, her palm facing George. But she paused, then slowly withdrew it back into her robe. "Yes, you may be right. But if I'm willing to sacrifice billions of lives, wouldn't it be logical for me to also be willing to sacrifice my soul? I don't care what guilt I must endure, what internal torment I must suffer for the rest of my life. Only one thing matters, and I *will* see it achieved."

"Why are those places shaking?" Paul blurted out, pointing to the screens. Every image now showed a world that seemed to be suffering from massive earthquakes. The Jane Alterants jerked about, still chained to the black sculptures that had toppled over on their sides.

"The Chi'karda is building, that's why," Jane answered, her voice so calm it made Tick mad. "Each Reality will see its own effects from the Blade's purge of the Fifth, but in the end, they'll suffer minimal damage. And all of my Alterants will survive to move on to the next phase of my plan. All except for the one in the Fifth, of course."

Tick was filled with turmoil. Though he didn't entirely understand what was going on, he felt an overwhelming responsibility to do something, to at least *try* something. He looked down into his lap, where his hands were clasped, squeezing them together so hard his fingers drained of blood. Maybe, if he could just reach for a trickle of Chi'karda . . . experiment a little . . .

"It's time for me to bend the Blade to my will," Jane announced. "Move from your chairs and die, as will Atticus's family. Frazier's watching. Remember to keep your eyes on the spinners. If your abilities to spread the message of what you witness today aren't sufficient, there'll be no reason for me to keep you alive."

Without waiting for an answer, she turned sharply and walked away, back to a spot before the black tree.

Tick barely saw her go. He was still looking down, concentrating on his

hands. He didn't know exactly why, but it helped to have a spot for his eyes to focus on as he mentally probed his mind and heart and body, searching for a spark of Chi'karda. Something small, he told himself, something Jane won't be able to sense . . .

"This can't be for real," Sofia said next to him, though he barely heard her over the sounds of the humming tree and through his efforts to think. "She can't possibly do something like this."

"She's doing it," Paul said. "Look at her. She's a nut job."

Tick finally closed his eyes, squeezing his mind as he tried to latch onto that mysterious something within him. He pictured Jane, focusing on his hatred of her. He pictured his family. He tried to think about what his heart must look like, pumping blood to his veins. It always started there, the warmth—

There. He could feel it. A spark. A little surge of heat. Like a flickering flame.

Just as he'd done before in his basement, Tick reached for the warmth, mentally grasping it with unseen hands. He didn't fully comprehend how he was doing it, but he threw all his energy into doing it anyway.

But then Master George said something, and even though Tick heard it only from a distance, as though it had been spoken through a thick wall, the words sliced through his concentration. The flame of Chi'karda, small to begin with, went out completely.

Tick opened his eyes and looked at Master George. "What did you say?" he asked, practically shouting to be heard over the thrumming of the tree.

The old man hung his head sadly. "It's true, I'm afraid. I believe Sato, Mothball, and Rutger are in the Fifth Reality even as we speak."

Lightning and Flame

Terror. Panic. Fear.

Those were words Lisa associated with disaster movies and scary books. News stories of dangerous lands thousands of miles away. History lessons of wars past. In her sixteen-and-a-half years of life, she'd never considered that one day those words might describe part of her own life, her own experience. Though she tried to be brave for her sister, she couldn't keep herself from crying every few minutes. Kayla's tears were a constant.

They'd been in the small room for at least a full day, maybe longer. Sparsely decorated, it held only two hard wooden chairs and a small bed with a table and lamp next to it. Drab wallpaper covered the walls, and ugly brown carpet covered the floor. There were no windows.

She had no idea how they'd gotten there. She'd been sleeping in her bed, dreaming about something icy crawling down her back, and then she woke up in this room, lying on the floor with Kayla right next to her. Since then, food had been brought to them by cruel ladies who refused to answer any of her questions and who glared at the two girls as if she and Kayla were hardened criminals.

Kidnapped, imprisoned, hated for no reason. It was all terrifying. The worst part was not knowing anything. She and Kayla mostly huddled together on the bed, hugging and consoling, sharing their tears. Lisa had no idea how many times she'd said the words, "It'll be okay," but it had to be at least one hundred.

She knew this had something to do with her brother. No one had told Lisa anything directly, but she knew about the Realitants and how Tick was special to them, helping them in some way. And somehow it had all led to this.

Come save us, Tick, she thought. I know you got us into this mess. Now come get us out!

Someone knocked hard on the door, just once, then opened it. Lisa had already started scooting as far away from the door as possible, dragging Kayla with her to the other side of the bed.

It was the older of the two ladies, her gray hair pulled into a tight bun, her pale face full of hard-lined wrinkles. "Might wanna see this," she said gruffly. Then she opened the door wider and stepped to the side, nodding toward the hallway.

“See what?” Lisa asked warily. “You want us to come out there?”

The old woman let out an exasperated sigh. “Yes. Come on, I’m trying to be nice, you little ingrate. Such a historic moment—wouldn’t want you to miss it.”

Lisa squeezed Kayla’s arms, then moved to get up from the bed.

“No!” Kayla shouted.

“It’ll be okay,” Lisa said softly, taking her sister by the hand. She hated saying those words again. “Come on.”

Kayla looked up at her with moist eyes, then slowly slid off the bed and followed Lisa, their hands still clasped. They walked to the doorway and into the hall. From there, the woman led them down a set of stairs and into a living room that was as ugly as the rest of the house, all dull colors and boring furniture. Several other ladies were sitting on chairs and a worn-out sofa. Every pair of eyes was glued to a television set on a small table.

When Lisa saw and heard what was coming from the TV, she almost forgot how terrified she’d been just moments earlier. It was a news program, a man’s tight voice narrating as the view switched from one scene of destruction to the next.

Fires. People trapped under cement, bloody and crying. Sirens. Shaky film of a large building, the horrendous crashing sounds booming from the television speakers when the structure crumbled to the ground. A massive car wreck. Smoke everywhere.

At first, Lisa was too shocked to read the words flashing across the bottom of the screen or hear exactly what the reporter was saying. But then she focused. The scrolling words accompanying the images made it clear the disasters were happening in different parts of the world. Paris. London. Berlin. Moscow.

Wait, she thought. Those cities were all in Europe and spread apart by hundreds and hundreds of miles. What could possibly be happening?

“The earthquakes are still rumbling as we speak,” the reporter was saying. “They’ve already shattered all known records in terms of length of time, and they still continue, as you can tell from the shaky video footage. All of Europe and Asia seem to be affected by these quakes. Mass panic is spreading out of control.”

Lisa felt an entirely new fear grip her. It made what she’d been feeling back in that prison of a room seem silly. That fear had been about just her and Kayla, trapped in a room, but otherwise safe and sound. This was something else. And whatever it was that was happening, Lisa knew the world would never be the same.

“What’s going on?” Kayla asked, her small voice breaking Lisa’s heart.

“I don’t know, sweetie. I don’t know.”

The last word had barely left her mouth when the lights suddenly went out. The TV made a popping sound as the screen went black. Kayla screamed, and the ladies in the room started bustling about in the darkness, each of them calling out things that jumbled into a chorus of panicked nonsense.

The room started to vibrate.

The floor trembled.

And then the house shook like someone had picked it up and thrown it.

~

Tick couldn't take it anymore. He had to do something.

As the black tree hummed and throbbed its pulses of energy, as people ran about adjusting computers, as Mistress Jane stood completely still, her expressionless mask pointed at the tree, as Paul and Sofia and Master George fidgeted in their chairs, Tick leaned forward, closed his eyes, and searched once again for the flame of his Chi'karda.

With mental hands, he probed and picked and prodded.

There it was—a puff of heat.

He found it much more quickly this time. Encouraged, he threw all his thought and concentration into the warmth, grasping it, tensing his body as he imagined himself enveloped in the heat, consumed by it. Once again, he had no real clue what he was doing, but he did it anyway. Somehow, with his mind and heart, he became one with the Chi'karda. He felt it spread through his organs and veins and skin. Felt himself burn.

Ordering the power to stay, to wait, to hold, he opened his eyes.

Everything was as it was before, except for one small change. He saw things more clearly, more crisply. He heard sounds more distinctly, each one somehow separated from the other, each one crystal clear. He sensed vibrations in the air, particularly from the black tree, its power tickling across his skin with every throb.

He looked at Jane standing in front of the tree, probably throwing her powers into the Blade of Shattered Hope, maybe even close to flicking the final switch and severing the Fifth Reality. Tick turned his gaze back to the black tree. Its darkness was so deep, its edges so finely detailed, he had a hard time believing his own eyes. His vision had gone beyond anything he thought possible—maybe this was what they called four-dimensional sight. Maybe five or six. Maybe infinity.

None of it mattered. He had to act. He'd convinced himself of this without realizing when or how, but he had to try. His family would be safe. He'd make sure of it. He'd do whatever it took.

Focusing as deeply as possible on the trunk of the black tree, he imagined a pinhole in the imaginary barrier he'd created within him. With his eyes wide and his hands gripping his knees, he released the slightest bit of pent up

Chi'karda. He felt an almost untraceable amount of heat leave his body.

A trickle, nothing more.

And not knowing what else to do, he focused all of his thoughts into one distinct line of words, saying them over and over in his mind, projecting them at the same spot where he'd aimed the Chi'karda.

Stop the Blade. Stop the Blade. Stop the Blade.

~



Sato ran, though he fell down with every fourth or fifth lunging leap forward.

The others did the same, stumbling and bumbling about like they'd just been granted the gifts of legs and were trying to figure out how to make them work. Rutger was having the hardest time of it. Sato swore he actually saw Rutger *roll* forward like a ball a few times.

Mothball stayed by her friend's side, helping him along as best she could. Tollaseat and Windasill worked together, pushing and pulling and balancing each other. Sato was on his own. He kept his head down and ran.

The earthquake continued to rage, shaking the entire world and everything on it. Crashes and clangs and breaking glass sounded like small explosions. The air reeked of sulfur and gas and burning wood. Screams came from every direction, from young and old, male and female.

And even though neither Sato nor anyone else knew where they were running to, there didn't seem to be any choice. You ran from terror, and that was that.

A booming crackle sounded to his left, splitting the air just as he caught a flash of bright light on the edge of his vision. He snapped his head around, but it was too late. The light was gone. It had been like a bolt of lightning.

Another one exploded in front of him. He barely had time to register the jagged line of brilliant white before he closed his eyes, hoping he wasn't blinded for life. Electric thunder rocked the air and shook the ground. Sato fell on his face and rolled three times, feeling rocks bruise and batter his body.

Another lightning strike, somewhere to his right. Another one way behind him. Each one was an explosion of light and energy and sound.

He got to his hands and knees, searching the area for his friends. He caught sight of Mothball sprawled across Rutger, scrambling to get up. No sign of her parents.

Sato stood up, lurching back and forth as the land continued to shake and tremble violently. Lightning was striking everywhere, long, crooked bolts of white fire hitting the ground in quick flashes instantaneously with the world-crushing sound. He held his hands up to his ears, wondering if he'd ever be able to see *or* hear again.

A brief pause in the lightning storm was as sudden as it was welcome. Sato squinted against the bright blurs of afterimages obscuring his vision as he headed toward Mothball. He had taken a few steps before he realized something very strange. The screams had stopped. So had the yelling and crying.

In disbelief, he scanned the area, shocked that he couldn't see anyone. Nobody. Nowhere. Only Mothball and Rutger. Where had everyone else gone?

He cupped his hands around his mouth to yell something to Mothball. "What's—"

A massive bolt of lightning shot from the sky, landing exactly on top of his two friends.

Sato threw his arm up to block the light, then looked as soon as it was gone. Barely able to see, he ran desperately toward the spot.

But even with his burned-out vision, he could tell Mothball and Rutger weren't there. They were gone. Completely gone.

Not even charred remains or blackened, smoking skeletons were left behind. And, oddly enough, the grass wasn't burning or even disturbed as far as he could tell. It was as if his two friends had just disappeared.

Maybe they've been winked away, he thought with an unexpected rise of jubilation. Maybe someone had saved them at the last second. In his present state of shock and panic, the idea didn't seem so far-fetched. Anything was possible, right?

As if in answer to his question, the world around him suddenly turned white, a blanketing sea of complete and utter brilliance that engulfed his body even as the air singed with burning heat.

Sato felt his body erupt in flames.

A Threat Reversed

Lisa's only thought was to find Kayla and keep her safe.

The house shook and rattled around her, the echoes of wood groaning and cracking, glass breaking, and the terrible ladies screaming. Darkness pressed in, and the air filled with a choking dust. Something smelled burnt.

Lisa crawled forward on her knees, fighting to keep her balance. She didn't understand why Kayla wasn't crying or yelling for her. They'd been standing close together when the earthquake began, but lost each other in the first chaotic seconds.

"Kayla!" she shouted. "Kayla!"

No one answered, but Lisa heard a distinct whimper to her left, a miracle considering the sounds of destruction surrounding them. She shuffled in that direction and bumped into the small body of her sister, who was curled up into a ball, shaking with sobs.

"Kayla," Lisa whispered. "It's okay, sweetie, it's okay. Come on. We need to get out of the house."

"No, no, no," Kayla murmured.

Scared the house might collapse on them at any second, Lisa put her arms around Kayla's body and lifted, grunting with the effort. She staggered to the right, running into a table, then to the left, hitting a wall. Squeezing Kayla tightly to her body, she moved forward, taking heavy and careful steps so as not to fall down. The light was dim, but she could see a hallway leading to the front door, which was open and hanging crookedly on one hinge. The whole house jumped as if it had grown legs.

"Let's get out of here!" she yelled as she decided to go for broke and sprinted for the door.

With a wobbly run, she made it to the opening and stumbled outside, falling into a clump of bushes. Tiny, sharp branches scratched her as she squeezed her arms even tighter around Kayla, trying to protect her. She kicked with her legs and used her elbows to maneuver their way out of the bushes and onto the front lawn.

The sounds of things breaking inside the house had been replaced with horrible, world-shattering cracks of thunder. Constant flashes of light illuminated their surroundings. Lisa saw people running, more people falling. The air smelled like burning plastic and tasted like . . . electricity. That was

the only word she could think of.

Then, forty feet away, a bolt of lightning arched down from the sky and exploded around a woman in a bulb of pure incandescence. Lisa squeezed her eyes shut, though it was too late. When she opened them, she was completely blind, seeing only blurs of white in front of her.

Not knowing what else to do, she hugged Kayla and smoothed her hair, crushed by how the little girl's body shook with sobs and terror. How could this be happening? *What* was happening?

The air around them exploded with heat and electricity. Pain ripped through Lisa's body, and her arms suddenly closed on empty air.

Kayla was gone.

~

Tick didn't know what he'd done.

He felt as though a chunk of his insides had somehow been squeezed through his skin and catapulted toward the black tree, engulfed by the pure darkness.

He fell from the chair, gasping for breath. His link to Chi'karda had vanished, replaced by a cold emptiness.

"Tick!" Sofia shouted, jumping out of her chair to kneel next to him. "Are you okay?"

Tick rolled over onto his back, looking up at her. "Yeah. I'm fine."

Paul stood and reached down to grab Tick's arm, then heaved him to his feet. "What happened?"

Tick shook his head. He couldn't have answered even if he felt like talking. He had no idea what had happened and began to worry that he'd done something really stupid.

"Take your seats," Master George snapped in a tight whisper. "She's coming."

Tick quickly sat down, as did Paul and Sofia. Sure enough, Mistress Jane was almost to them, marching with determined steps, her red mask showing an anger that made Tick's heart want to stop.

"What did you do?" she screamed into Tick's face. "What did you put in the Blade?"

Tick leaned back in his chair and looked up at her, embarrassed and terrified. "I don't know," was all he could get out.

Jane's chest heaved up and down beneath her robe. "You . . . don't . . . know?"

Tick shook his head, dread exploding within him. What had he done? What had he been *thinking*? She was going to kill his family. He knew it. She was going to kill them!

“I felt a surge of Chi’karda slice into the Blade,” Jane said, her breath still quick. “It had to come from you. What did you do? If I have to repeat the question again, your youngest sister will be killed. Then the other one. Speak.”

Tick fought the panic thrusting up his throat, threatening to choke him. He had to have lost his mind. How could he have been so stupid to try something when he didn’t even know how to control it or what he was doing?

“What did—” Jane began.

“Wait!” Tick shouted. “I . . . I just . . . I tried to use my Chi’karda. I don’t know what I was thinking. . . . I’m sure it didn’t do anything!”

“What did you expect?” Master George said, coming to Tick’s defense. “You tell us you’re about to kill billions of people, and you expect the boy will sit there quietly? He has something you don’t, Jane. Morals!”

Jane’s head slowly swiveled around until her eyes paused on Master George. “Enough talk. Frazier!”

The man was at her side before the ring of her shout had faded away. “Yes, Mistress?”

Jane returned her gaze to Tick, the features of her mask melting into a void of expression. “Order the Ladies of Blood and Sorrow to kill the younger girl. Now.”

“No!” Tick screamed, vaulting to his feet as Frazier walked away. He felt like an arrow had just sliced through his chest, tearing a jagged rip across his heart.

Jane’s hand shot out from her robe, her palm flat and facing Tick. A thump of solid air slammed into his body, throwing him into the air. He flipped backward and landed on the ground behind the row of chairs. Jolts of pain made him shudder as he turned his head to look back toward Jane.

“Stop it!” Sofia yelled. She stood up as well, her hands clenched into fists at her side. She rocked back and forth on her feet as if contemplating whether or not to attack Jane. “How can you be such an evil—”

Jane’s hand flicked toward Sofia and sent her body shooting through the air to ram into one of the screens that currently showed a burning building. Sofia and the screen crashed to the ground with a clatter of clanging metal rods and ripping cloth.

Tick pushed himself off the ground, groaning from soreness. Anger lit his insides like liquid flame, and he knew his Chi’karda was welling up again, threatening to explode out of him. Kayla. All he could think about was Kayla. What could he do . . .

Movement by the chairs grabbed his attention. Paul had been sitting still, obviously waiting for the right moment. Just as Jane turned away from Sofia, Paul leaped from his chair and tackled Jane. He grabbed her around the waist

and pushed her to the ground, falling on top of her. They'd barely landed when Paul suddenly shot straight up into the air, hovering ten feet above Jane. Then his body flew away until he slammed into another screen, with the same result as Sofia's unwanted flight.

Jane got to her feet, brushed the dust and dirt from her robe, then looked at Master George. "You want to try something, George? Here, let me go ahead and save you the trouble."

She pushed her hand toward the old man. He flew up and backward over the chairs, landing on his stomach just a few feet from Tick. He didn't move, lying flat with his arms and legs twisted at awkward angles, his face on a rock. There was blood.

Tick couldn't take it anymore. This woman was evil. She was too evil.

He got to his feet, staggering a little until he caught his balance. Then he held up a hand and pointed a finger at Jane.

"Listen to me," he said, his voice straining from the internal effort of holding back the Chi'karda burning within him. "If you kill my sister—"

"What?" Jane snapped, taking a step forward. "What, Atticus? What will you do?"

"Then I won't care what happens anymore," Tick said. "If you kill Kayla, I won't care about anything. I'll build up this Chi'karda until it's a million times stronger than it was back at Chu's mountain. I'll build and build, and then I'll let it all out. I'll throw it all at you."

Jane shook her head. "So selfish, so . . . *weak*. You can still save your other sister and your parents. And you can help me achieve great things in the Realities, if you'd just grow up and see things with a bigger perspective."

Tick hated her. Oh, how he hated her. "Don't say another word to me! Tell him not to kill my sister. Now!"

"No."

She said it so simply, so nonchalantly. But Tick couldn't back down—he had to reverse the threat here. The power burned and boiled inside his chest. "I'll count to three. Stop Frazier, or I'll throw it all at you. Every ounce of it. Even if it kills me."

"No," she said again.

The Chi'karda was starting to overpower him. He felt his hands begin to shake. He quickly stepped forward and gripped the back of a chair to steady himself. "One," he said as calmly as he could.

Jane did nothing, just kept staring at him with a blank expression on her mask.

"Two," Tick said. Fear filled him. He didn't know if he had the courage to go through with his threat.

“Three,” Jane said for him.

Tick’s fingers tightened on the chair. He looked down to see that they’d actually sunk into the metal, warping it. He had to do this. He had to—

“Mistress Jane!” a man’s voice yelled.

Tick’s head snapped up to see Frazier run frantically around the computer tables, heading straight for them.

“Mistress!” the man shouted again. “Something’s wrong!” He pulled up, panting with deep breaths.

“Speak!” Jane yelled back at him.

Frazier held his hands up to his ears as if his head were about to explode. His eyes were lit with panic. “They’re all gone—all of them. Everything’s gone crazy with the earthquakes and lightning . . . but there’s no doubt. I can’t find them anywhere. None of them!”

“What are you saying?” Jane insisted.

Frazier turned to look at Tick. “His sisters. His parents. They’ve all disappeared.”

Colored Marble Tiles

The scream had barely escaped Sato's mouth before the excruciating pain vanished, gone in an instant. It didn't fade or slowly feel better. One second he felt like his entire body was on fire, horrible burns eating away at his skin, the next second he was perfectly fine. He collapsed to the rock-hard ground anyway, the mental shock of the pain bad enough. The air around him was gray and dull, twilight's last moments before full night.

On his back, he held up his hands even though he dreaded what he might see. Blood and red blisters at best. Black, charred flesh at worse. But instead, in the faint glow of the light around him, he saw smooth, healthy skin, not a blemish or a scrape or a bruise.

What had happened? He remembered the earthquake, then bolts of lightning striking everywhere, and people disappearing when struck. Then the world had lit up, exploded in fire, as if he himself had been . . .

Sucking in a gasp, he sat up, then scrambled to his feet. He turned in a slow circle, looking all around him. With each second, with each revolution, his eyes grew wider and wider. He saw no sign of the homes and trees and stone walls of the Fifth Reality. He'd been taken to another place. Even though the light was dim, he had no doubt of it.

He stood on a vast, flat ground made of a hard substance and checkered with large squares of differing colors. It seemed to stretch in every direction as far as he could see, with no breaks of any kind. He knelt down and felt the floor. It was cool to the touch. Marble, maybe. The light wasn't strong enough for him to see if the floor had the familiar pattern of that stone.

He stood back up and looked above him. Though the marble floor beneath him would suggest that he was inside a building of some sort, no other evidence supported it. No roof hung above him—just blank, unblemished air. No stars, no clouds, no planes in the sky. The perimeter around him was just as gray and lifeless. The floor went on forever, with no walls or fences or trees. No mountains in the distance. No furniture.

That was all; a marble floor with countless squares of color, stretching to infinity in every direction and a lifeless sky that seemed the definition of *nothing*.

I'm dreaming, he thought. Or maybe he was dead. Though he'd never learned much about religion and the afterlife, he couldn't help but think of the

possibility that he'd died and was in some sort of waiting room for souls. Certainly no place like this existed in the real world, no matter which Reality.

He heard a humming sound behind him and turned quickly to check it out.

Twenty or thirty feet away, a figure lay crumpled on the floor. It was a girl with curly blonde hair, her clothes filthy and torn. She had black smudges on her bare skin. She looked to be about his same age. She twitched a little and let out a low groan.

"Hey!" Sato yelled, cringing when it came out so harshly. "Are you okay? Do you know where we are?"

The girl glanced at him when she heard his voice, her eyes filled with fear. "Hello?" she called back weakly.

Sato ran to her, sure he must be in a dream after all. He approached her and knelt on the ground, putting a hand out to touch her shoulder softly.

"You okay?" he asked again. "I don't know how we got here."

He looked around again, scanning their surroundings to see if anything had changed. Still nothing but colored marble tiles going forever and a sky of dead air. He returned his attention to the girl.

"My name's Sato," he said, hoping the girl would snap out of her daze and help him understand what was going on. She looked up, and he saw tears streaking down her cheeks.

"I'm Lisa," she said, stifling a sob. "Have you seen my sister?"

~

At first, Tick felt the slightest hint of hope at Frazier's words, but it didn't last long. He remembered the horrible images of destruction on the screens, recognizing that the man had said his sisters and parents had vanished *after* mentioning earthquakes and lightning.

There was nothing good about that. Maybe they'd been trapped under rubble. Maybe they'd been struck by lightning. Maybe no one could find them because they were dead.

No! he shouted in his mind. His insides still boiled, the heat of his Chi'karda flaring up even stronger at the depressing thoughts of what might have happened. He didn't know if he'd ever felt so scared and completely hopeless. Useless.

Jane had stayed quiet for a long moment after Frazier's pronouncement, staring at the man with a blank expression. Then she turned to Tick.

"Then they're probably dead already," she said coolly. "How fitting it would be if it was *your* disobedience, Atticus, your arrogant, reckless use of Chi'karda that ended up killing your family. I hope you can live with that."

Tick barely heard the words. He couldn't hold back the Chi'karda anymore. He'd let it go too far, and now it was too late to stop it. His insides

had become a roaring inferno.

Something seemed to rip deep inside of him, and he screamed from the pain. He fell to his knees, wrapping his arms around himself. Trying to escape it, he curled into a ball and screamed again, as loudly as he could.

Everything *changed*.

The dusty desert around him vanished, replaced by trees.

The power and burning disappeared, as did the pain, and everything was perfectly silent, except for his quick and heavy breaths.

He was in the middle of a forest. And he was alone.

Silver-Blue Light

Tick didn't move for a long time.

The forest was dark, only the slightest traces of moonlight seeping through the thick canopy of branches above him, dappled here and there on the ground. He heard nothing but a few insects and the very distant sound of a dog barking. The woods smelled fresh and pungent, the scent of the pine trees closest to him by far the strongest. It made him think of Christmas.

Which made him think of his family, which pulled at his heart like a huge rock had been tied to it and dropped to his stomach. He ached for them, and he didn't know how he could survive if they'd been hurt or killed. For now, not knowing anything for certain, his mind only allowed him to hold onto hope. He didn't let anything too dark settle on his thoughts. They *could* be alive. There were a million possibilities for such a thing, and he held onto that.

He had to get going. He had to figure out where he'd been sent. Had he actually winked himself? That seemed the only logical explanation, but the instant he'd arrived in the forest, the flames of Chi'karda had burned out, leaving him empty. He was cold, and not just because the air in the forest was cool and wetly crisp, as if a storm might be coming. He also felt the chill of fear.

He stood up and turned in a slow circle, scanning the woods. He saw only trees, some thin, some thick, all of them crowded one after the other until they faded into obscure shadows. He closed his eyes to focus, but again, he heard only the insects and that frantic dog, still in the distance. Unless some super spy was nearby, watching him in silence, he was alone.

What *had* happened? His experience with winking kept the situation from being completely bizarre, but had he really done it to himself? Or had it been Sally back at headquarters? He doubted that since no one else came with him; also, it would have made much more sense to wink him to Master George's compound in the Bermuda Triangle, not to the middle of the woods.

A lot of questions, no answers, and it was cold. He shivered, rubbed his arms, and told himself once again that he needed to get going. But the worry that he'd go in the wrong direction kept his feet glued to the forest floor.

Go, he thought. Just go. That way.

He stepped forward, but stopped when the sound of crunching ground

cover startled him. He took another quick look around him. Nothing.

Shaking off his childish worries, he walked forward resolutely, moving aside tree branches and stomping down weeds. The crick-crash with every step filled the air with echoes until it almost seemed like someone *was* following him. He realized he was acting a little ridiculous and feeling way too paranoid. Refusing to slow again for another look, he kept going through the trees.

He'd just squeezed through two big oaks when he definitely heard something behind him: a quick but loud moan, as if some giant had awakened with a stomachache. Sucking in a breath, Tick spun around, throwing his arms out to catch his balance on the thick trees. There'd been an odd glimmer of light behind him, he was certain. But it disappeared the instant he saw it.

Silence returned, thicker than before. The moan must have spooked the insects, because they'd quieted as well. Tick felt a sudden burst of claustrophobia, there in the darkness with the trees pressing in around him.

Childish or not, he was officially scared. That stifled groan had sounded otherworldly, like a . . .

Well, like a ghost.

He turned and ran, not taking the time to be careful anymore. Branches slapped his face, and twigs and leaves scratched his skin. He didn't stop, dodging the obstacles as best he could.

Oooooohhhhhhhhhnnnnnnnnnn . . .

There it was again—the low moan. It was still behind him, but this time it lasted much longer. A flicker of terror, like icy water shooting up his throat, made him cough and wheeze. He wanted to look back. Every instinct *screamed* for him to look back, but he knew he'd have to slow down to do that, or he'd run right smack into a tree. Weaving, dodging, ducking, he ran on.

A flash of silvery light gleamed from behind him, illuminating the woods. Unable to fight the urge to look, Tick stopped, put his hand against a pine tree, and turned around. Once again the strange glow vanished as soon as he saw it, but he'd caught a glimpse of wispy brilliance, as if streamers of fog had magically transformed into a cloud of almost blue light.

Oooooohhhhhhhhhnnnnnnnnnn . . .

The sound came again, along with another few flashes of the silver, misty beams. There was something oddly *metallic* about the light, making Tick think of aluminum or steel. And then it was gone.

Tick turned and ran again, swearing to himself he wouldn't stop again until he found a person, a building, something. A policeman or a ghost hunter would be great.

Because of the darkness, he had no idea he was at the edge of the forest

until he broke through the last line of trees. A sharp but short hill sloped up, and he stumbled and fell before he could slow down. His face smacked into a clod of dirt. He spit the gritty stuff out of his mouth as he scrambled with his hands and feet to move up the hill.

He reached the top, pumping his legs and flailing his arms until he found his balance and could run again. His feet slapped pavement—a road. It took another few seconds for Tick to realize where he'd been sent. Or where he had sent himself. A mixture of relief and confusion consumed him, almost making him stop again.

But he didn't stop; he didn't even slow down. He knew exactly where to go, and a fresh surge of adrenaline lifted his energy and spirits.

He was in Deer Park, Washington, on the road leading to his neighborhood, a path he'd walked thousands of times in his life. The why and how ceased to matter in his mind. Something creepy was behind him, and his house was in front of him.

He ran for home.

~

As Tick rounded his mailbox and shot up the driveway, he couldn't help but feel a trace of *déjà vu*. His thoughts went back to his very first wink, when he'd gone to the cemetery as instructed and performed the strange initiation ritual he'd had to figure out from the twelve clues sent to him by Master George.

When he'd winked that night and felt that cool tingle down the back of his neck, the first of many more to come, he thought it hadn't worked. Sullen and heartbroken, he'd headed for home only to discover he'd been sent to an alternate Reality, one in which a strange, nasty old man lived in Tick's house.

What if that old man was there again? Or another one?

What if Tick had been winked to another Reality, and his Alterant was in the house, sleeping or sitting at the computer or about to come outside? Though he'd been totally unconscious in the Fourth Reality, Sofia and Paul had told him about what happened when the two versions of Reginald Chu met. There had been an earthquake, a wave of air, and the Reginald from the Fourth had disappeared, gone to some place Master George called the Nonex.

What if that happened to Tick when he opened the door?

Then, despite the darkness, he noticed the crashed garage door from when the water creatures had attacked his parents. His doubts washed away, and he ran up to the bushes lining the house and dropped to his knees, searching for the fake rock that contained a spare key. The key had been missing before when he'd unknowingly been winked to an alternate reality. This time he found it, and, pulling the key from the rock, he ran up the porch steps and unlocked the front door. He went inside and flicked the light switch in the

hallway. Nothing happened.

He walked into the kitchen, the moonlight seeping through the windows just enough to aid his way. The lights there didn't work either. He paused and listened for a minute. Nothing, not even the sound of the fridge or the heater.

So the power was out. Maybe nearby areas had been hit by the same devastation he'd witnessed on the screens back in the Thirteenth.

Based on what little he could see, he no longer had any doubt this was Reality Prime, and that this was his very own house. Just to make absolutely sure, he made his way back to the stairs and went up them to his room, feeling carefully along the wall in the dark. Every bit of furniture, the blankets on the bed, the wall decorations—everything was exactly as he last remembered seeing them.

He felt a little disappointed. Deep down he'd been hoping to find his family here, even though he knew it was a long shot. Jane had taken them, but then Frazier had said they'd disappeared. Tick had hoped the same thing might have happened to them as what had happened to him. He'd hoped they had been sent back home too.

Bad thoughts drifted through his mind, images of all the terrible things their vanishing from Jane's captors might mean.

To get his mind off it, he knelt down on the floor and reached under his mattress. After feeling about, he found what he'd been looking for and pulled it out, then sat on the bed. Though he couldn't see it very well in the pale light coming through the window, he knew every detail of the object anyway. His *Journal of Curious Letters*.

Yes. Unless this was a Reality that had split from Prime very recently, he at least knew he was in the right place. But what in the world was he supposed to do now?

He set the book on the table by his bed and kicked up his legs onto the bed, not bothering to take off his shoes. He lay back onto his pillow, hands clasped behind his head, and stared at the ceiling. Odd-shaped shadows from the moonlight slanted from corner to corner, dark and menacing. He closed his eyes.

Sleep. Could he really sleep despite all the terrible things going on that very instant? He didn't know, but he needed it for sure. Surprising himself, he relaxed, feeling the first trickles of sleep edge his mind.

A minute passed. Two. The darkness was deep. No sound except a slight breeze pushing branches against the outside of the house. Something smelled good, like the fresh scent of laundry detergent and dryer sheets. All of it seemed to pull him down into the bed, as comfortable as he ever remembered being. Almost feeling guilty, he sank into the welcome pool of slumber.

Oooooohhhhhhhhhnnnnnnnnnn . . .

This time the sound came from the hallway right outside his room, a miserably haunted, ghostly moan. Tick shot up in bed, his feet swinging to the floor. A silver-blue light glowed through the space under the door.

So much for sleep.

Many Faces

He heard the sound again. Then again. And again. Each time it was only a few seconds apart. The moan had such a creepy, deathly feel to it that prickles of goose bumps shot up all over his body, and he felt like every hair on his head reached for the ceiling. This was a new kind of terror—something very different from the constant worry of being killed or hurt, something he'd almost become accustomed to.

No, this was like a real-life ghost story. He was in a horror movie.

He quietly stood up and walked over to the window, carefully stepping on the non-creaking spots of his bedroom floor. He looked through the glass, wondering if he'd have the courage to jump out. The moon cast its pale glow on the yard outside, making the trees look dark blue and creating shadows in which he could imagine every monster from his every nightmare hiding, waiting.

Oooooohhhhhhhhhnnnnnnnnnn . . .

Tick turned around to face the door. His mind felt hollowed out. How had it come to this? An hour ago he'd been in the middle of a desert in the Thirteenth Reality, watching Mistress Jane destroy an entire world. Now he was back in his house, in the dark, staring at a sheet of silver-blue light panning across his floor. He saw that it wavered with flashes and glimmers of shadow as though the source of the light was a gigantic TV out in the hallway, showing an old black-and-white film.

He didn't want to face whatever was out there. He turned back to the window and unlatched the lock. After pulling up the window, he unhooked the screen. He stuck his head out to look at the ground twenty feet below. If he could land in that clump of bushes . . .

Behind him, the moan took on a different pitch, stuttered. Then something sounded almost like a cough, followed by an odd crackle. Tick couldn't help but look back at this new noise.

Tendrils of bright white electricity danced around the doorknob, sparking and zigzagging like small bolts of lightning. It had a charged sound to it, like the monster-making machines in the old Frankenstein movies. There were dozens of small sparks casting flashes of light all over the room.

Tick was pretty sure he had stopped breathing and didn't know if he would ever start again.

The lightning and electricity intensified, spreading out and growing larger until they covered the entire door and the walls around it. A glow of silvery light formed in the middle, growing brighter and brighter until Tick couldn't see the features of the door or his wallpaper. Just a globe of metallic blue.

He realized he was in some sort of a trance. He was about to turn away and jump out the window—he'd take the broken leg or arm instead of whatever this was—when the entire display in front of him collapsed into an oblong and upright shape, standing maybe six feet tall. Crackles of electricity still danced along the surface, but they seemed more controlled, swirling around the oval body of light.

Then, to Tick's shock, a large face appeared in the middle of the light. It was a young woman, her features shimmering but smooth, and her expression showing a small struggle, as if she was concentrating on a difficult task. But then she was gone, replaced by another face. This time it was a man, his features rigid and angled. Then another face formed—a young boy. Then another one—an old woman, her wrinkles lines of blue against silver. A second later, a younger woman appeared, this one with a round face and eyes.

More faces appeared, each one lasting only a few moments before another took its place. Boys and girls, men and women, all ages and all races. They all had that same look of intense effort, their eyes focused on Tick, sometimes with their tongue bit between their lips.

Tick realized he'd relaxed. He was breathing normally and no longer felt the urge to jump out the window. If this thing was a ghost, it didn't seem very scary. After all the studying and intense reading of science and its inner workings he'd done over the past months, his rational mind had finally taken over. What he saw before him had to be some kind of explainable phenomenon, and his fear had been replaced by excitement to find out what it was.

The faces continued to change, one after the other, all types and ages. The light cast from the glowing oval shimmered and danced in the room, which had an even more relaxing effect on Tick. He stepped over to his desk, pulled out the chair, and sat down, never taking his eyes off the apparition.

The morphing faces seemed to relax a bit. When a young Asian man appeared, the lips of his mouth parted. He transformed into an African-American woman, and her lips began to form a word. When the sound finally came out, traveling across the room for a very shocked Tick to hear, it came from a teenage boy. Then a fat man. Then a beautiful woman. Then an old man. Face after face, image after image, their lips remained in sync as the odd phenomenon began to speak. The voice never changed, however; it was deep and charged with energy, laced with crackles of electricity.

“Atticus Higginbottom,” it said. *They* said. “We need to have a very

serious talk.”



~

Sato had learned a lot about Tick’s sister. There wasn’t much else to do when you were stuck in a place that stretched to infinity in every direction with nothing to see but colored marble squares. They’d walked for awhile as they talked, but eventually had given up, deciding they were just as well off sitting and waiting for something to happen as they were wandering about aimlessly.

“I’m sure your sister is safe,” he said after a long lull in their conversation. “Somehow those bolts of lightning sent us somewhere else. Here. Maybe

other places. Maybe totally random, I don't know. But the more I think about it, the more I think it has to be something like that. If the lightning had been killing people, it would've left behind charred bodies."

Lisa nodded absently, staring down at her finger as she traced the lines in the red marble square on which she sat cross-legged. "Charred bodies. Pleasant."

"How much do you know about the Realitants?" Sato asked.

"Most of it," she replied, looking up at him. She'd stopped crying, but her eyes were still puffy and red. "I tried to keep living my normal life and pretend it was just something for Tick, something I didn't have to worry about. I have my friends, you know? I have my own life. My mom and dad tried hard not to put all their attention on Tick and his fancy Realitant stuff, but they couldn't help it. I don't really blame them. I was happy to kind of ignore it all. Guess I have no choice now."

She pulled up her legs to wrap her arms around her knees. "This has something to do with Tick, right? It can't be a coincidence that I'm his sister and was kidnapped and then sent here by a bolt of lightning."

"I'm sure it has something to do with Tick and Mistress Jane," Sato said. "Our boss had a meeting scheduled with her, and I'm sure it all went to pot right about then."

"What's really happening? I've never been in an earthquake before, but I'm pretty sure what I just went through wasn't normal. Especially with all the lightning."

Sato shook his head. "I don't know. We're not sure what happened to Jane after the crazy stuff in the Fourth Reality, but if she survived, I'm guessing she's one ticked-off lady. And she has weird powers. She can do things with Chi'karda. For all we know, she's messing things up pretty bad out there."

"Yeah," Lisa replied, her eyes staring at a spot in the distance. She looked slightly dazed. Sato had to remind himself that all of this was new to her, no matter how many times she'd heard about it. To really understand it, to really *know*, you had to experience stuff like this yourself.

They sat in silence for awhile. Then Lisa said, "I can't imagine how scared Kayla is." A tear trickled down her cheek. She sniffed and squeezed her nose with her thumb and forefinger. "I won't be able to live if something bad happens to her."

Sato couldn't help but feel her sorrow. It made him think of the days and weeks and months he'd spent bawling his eyes out after Jane killed his parents. Why did there have to be so much evil in the world? Why couldn't people like Jane realize the pain they inflicted or understand the end results on everyday lives? How was it possible to have such a complete absence of compassion? He couldn't possibly hate Jane any more than he already did, but

he felt his rage and thirst for revenge spring up anew.

“We’ll find your sister,” he said, hoping the promise didn’t sound too empty. “We’ll find your whole family, and we’ll make Jane pay for whatever she’s done. It’s the only thing I live for now.”

Lisa looked at him, her eyes red and wet and surrounded by dark, hollow circles on her face. “Thanks.”

Something hummed deeply behind Sato, and he noticed Lisa look sharply over his shoulder, surprise transforming her face. The floor vibrated slightly as well.

He spun around to see what had happened.

Mothball was standing there, looking as surprised as Sato felt.

~

It took a minute or so for Tick to gather himself, remembering that he’d seen many strange things since receiving his very first letter from Master George and that this was just the next in a long line of oddities. He pushed away the shock he felt, ignoring the impossibility of what he saw before him. So a big oval of silver-blue light was talking to him with hundreds of different faces mouthing the words. Big deal. He had to respond.

“How do you know my name?” he asked, proud that the words came out with no squeaks or stutters.

When the entity responded, its face started out as a teenage girl with long hair but had morphed into an old man by the time the short phrase was finished. “We have been observing you and your Realitant friends.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” said a woman who changed into a man.

Tick was completely fascinated. “What are you? I mean . . . *who* are you?”

The glowing apparition was quiet for a moment, though the faces continued to change at the same rapid pace. Finally, a wise-looking, ancient woman appeared to speak the words, “They call us the Haunce.”

Souliken

The entity paused after revealing its name, as if it wanted Tick to respond. But Tick had questions buzzing around his head like flies swarming a light bulb, and he couldn't settle on just one. So he sat there, slack-jawed and silent.

“Do not be afraid,” the many-faced apparition said. “We are as close a thing to a ghost as you will ever see, but we are much kinder than the storybooks make us out to be. It takes considerable effort to gather ourselves into something strong enough to appear visually to those still alive. We would never do it simply to scare someone. It would be ridiculous.”

If Tick had flies buzzing a moment earlier, now they had become an army of bees. *A ghost? Appear visually to those still alive?* What was this thing?

He decided to make a statement that encompassed all of his confusion in three short words. “I don't understand.”

A smile appeared on a girl's face, glowing silvery blue. When the face transformed into a middle-aged man, the smile was still there. “We would not expect you to. Sit and listen. We will explain.”

Tick had never heard a better idea in his life. He nodded his head emphatically.

“Good.” The Haunce's orb of light expanded then retracted, as if it had taken a deep breath. The ever-changing faces spoke. “We are here because terrible things have happened in the Realities over the last few hours. When it became apparent that we must reveal ourselves, we chose you. The reason for that choice is something we may not have time to explain, but we shall see.”

Tick didn't say anything, but he scrunched up his face in confusion, hoping the entity would change its mind. Whatever this ghostly visage was, why would it have chosen *him* of all people to appear to? Tick wanted to know the answer to that question very badly, but he forced himself to remain silent and listen intently as the Haunce continued speaking.

“We come to you now because enormous and catastrophic disturbances have shattered the barriers of the Realities. We know this because we are *part* of the barriers, interwoven into the Chi'karda that has served to bind the Realities together and build the wall to keep them apart. If we had not acted quickly, we might have been destroyed and the memories of billions upon billions of lives would have been obliterated. But we escaped before the worst

of it happened.”

The Haunce paused, flashing three different faces before a weary-eyed man with a short-cropped beard appeared and spoke. “We never would have thought it possible that someone could harness, much less control, the dark matter as the woman named Mistress Jane has done. Even we do not understand its properties to the fullest. And yet, she has unleashed it, annihilating the bonds between the Realities and sending them to drift apart from one another. What she does not understand is that soon the fragmenting will begin. In every Reality. A human body cannot survive when separated into pieces; the Realities are no different. What she has done will lead to the end of everything as we know it. The end of existence.”

Tick felt a leprous lump growing in his belly. Although he didn’t understand the nitty-gritty details, not to mention any of the logistics or complex science of what the Haunce was describing, he was smart enough to connect the dots. Mistress Jane had said from the start that she was going to sever the Fifth Reality and destroy it. From what the Haunce had just said, Tick suspected Jane must have accidentally enacted her diabolical plan on every last Reality.

And then Tick had another thought, perhaps the worst thought to ever cross the pathways of his mind. What if *he* had done this? What if his little exercise in throwing a trickle of Chi’karda into the black tree, into the dark matter that made up the Blade of Shattered Hope, had somehow disrupted Jane’s plan? What if, by trying to help, he’d made it worse—infinately worse? His more rational side had told him he wasn’t ready to try something so foolish. Why hadn’t he listened?

The lump inside him grew, filling his body with acid. He’d spent the last few months trying to ensure he never repeated anything like what he’d done in Chu’s mountain palace. But if he’d just helped destroy every last Reality, that made the fiasco with Chu’s Dark Infinity and Mistress Jane look like a food fight. Panic and worry consumed him.

“Atticus,” the Haunce said. “We can feel your thoughts. We can feel your mind and see this dark path which you choose to walk. You must stop. Immediately. You do not understand even the slightest parcel of the whole.”

Tick was staring at the floor. He didn’t remember looking away from the Haunce, but he returned his gaze to the glowing entity at its words. He sensed some hope, maybe some redemption, in what it had said.

A young woman stared back at him, her face full of compassion. Tick wished desperately she could stay, that her face not change. But a few seconds later it slipped into an older man, the kind look not as reassuring on him.

“We are soulkens, Atticus,” the Haunce said. “Do you know what that means?”

Tick shook his head.

“We sense in your memories that you have recently come to understand the heart of the human body and how the power of electricity is vital to its life-giving properties. Without electricity, the heart would not pump. If the heart did not pump, blood would not flow. And if the blood did not flow, there would be no life.”

Tick nodded, surprised by this turn in the conversation, but intrigued.

“Most people do not understand that electricity is a natural phenomenon,” the Haunce continued. “Much of its uses are unknown and immeasurable to scientists. Similar to how Chi’karda is not understood by most quantum physicists in the Realities, except for those who have joined ranks with the Realitants. Electricity is the key. Electronic pulses. Electronic imprints. They intertwine with almost every function of your mind and body, creating permanent stamps in the fabric of Reality—of time and space—that represent the person from whence they came.”

The Haunce paused, and Tick realized if he moved one more inch forward, he’d fall out of his chair. After an interminable few seconds, the glowing pool of faces continued.

“*That* is what soulakens are, Atticus. They are your imprints on the universe, and they can never be erased. They pool together every second of your life, collecting and gathering and forming into something that is undeniably as much you as . . . you. That is what we are. We are the soulakens of billions of people, a bank of memories and thoughts and feelings. We give life to the spaces between the atoms and neutrons and electrons. We give life to the universe of quantum physics. We give life to Chi’karda.”

Tick stared at the morphing faces, completely and utterly engrossed in every word.

But then the faces frowned, the endless eyes filled with a deep sadness.

“What’s wrong?” Tick asked quickly.

The Haunce wiped away the frown, but it still looked unhappy. “It works both ways, Atticus. The Chi’karda also gives us life. One cannot exist without the other. Mistress Jane has severed the Realities from one another, destroying the bonds between them. And when the fragmenting begins, when all of Reality begins to fall to the lasting and eternal grip of entropy, so will we. Everything will end. Everything.”

Tick didn’t know how to respond. Impossibly, he almost felt as if his grief and worry for this collection of ghosts was as strong as his concern for his family. He was starting to understand that what Jane had done would not only kill all those living today, but also all those who had lived in the past. It would be a holocaust of all time and of all people, of all thoughts and ideas and memories. Everything would be wiped away into the oblivion of dark matter.

The Haunce spoke again, snapping him back to attention.

“But not all is lost.”

“What do you mean?” Tick asked.

“We believe there is someone who can save us. Save the Realities.”

Tick had the horrible feeling he already knew the answer, but he asked anyway. “Who?”

The Haunce glowed brightly. “You.”

Come Together

Sato and Mothball stared at each other for what seemed like a full hour, eyes locked, eyebrows raised. She was filthy from head to toe, her hair hanging in ratty strings to her shoulders. Sato kept thinking she'd disappear any second, sure that he was having a hallucination. The staring became almost comical. Especially when she broke into a grin and simply said, "Ello."

Hearing her speak snapped Sato from his trance. "Mothball! What are you doing here? Where are we? What happened to everyone else?"

Mothball limped forward, eyeing Lisa as if she'd just noticed Tick's sister was there. "No idea what's 'appened. Felt like I've been nappin' for a full week, just woke up, and 'ere I am in a ruddy place that can't possibly exist. How long you been 'ere?"

Sato realized he had no clue. "I . . . don't know. Maybe an hour? I wasn't here very long before Lisa showed up. By the way, this is Tick's sister."

Mothball couldn't hide her surprise. "What in the name of the Grand Minister is Tick's wee little sis doin' 'ere?"

"Nice to meet you too," Lisa said in deadpan voice.

"So sorry," she said quickly, holding out one of her gigantic hands. After Lisa shook it, Mothball continued. "Just surprised, is all. What are the ruddy chances of us meetin' 'ere with you?"

Lisa shook her head. "You think you're confused? Guess how I feel."

Sato felt it too. Everything seemed to have gone completely insane. He turned in a circle, throwing his arms up to gesture at their strange surroundings. "Where could this possibly be? What is it? Why would the three of us—"

Before he could finish, that same humming noise vibrated through the air, this time coming from a spot directly in front of him. At the same time, a dark blue square of marble rotated on an unseen axis, completely turning over until what had been the bottom was now the top, though with dark-red squiggly lines scratched across its surface. As soon as the tile settled into place, a person appeared on the marble square, instantly flashing into existence.

It was Mothball's mom, Windasill.

Sato swore right then he was done being surprised.

Mothball ran to her mom and pulled her into a massive hug as Windasill

looked about in confusion.

“Don’t worry,” Mothball said after stepping back. “None of us know a ruddy thing, but thank the heavens we’re together. Mayhaps the old man’ll show up soon, he will.”

“It was so dreadful,” Windasill said after giving her daughter the kindest smile Sato thought he’d ever seen. “The shaking, the lightning. Last thing I remember, a bolt of energy came straight down on me head. Burned like the dickens, it did. Then it was dark, like sleep. I was barely aware. Next thing I know, I’m ’ere. Mothball, what’s going on, dear?”

“Don’t know.” She shrugged and looked at Sato.

“Me, neither,” Sato murmured.

“Does anyone at least have a guess?” Lisa asked. “Come on. You guys are Realitants, right? At least take a wild stab at it.”

Sato was impressed with Tick’s sister. She was no nonsense, level-headed. Brave. Tick had once made her out to be a smart-aleck pain in the rear. Maybe hard times had brought out her inner strength.

“Well?” Lisa said.

“If I ’ad to make a guess,” Mothball said, folding her arms as her eyes revealed she was frantically trying to come up with an answer. “I reckon I’d say that . . . well, me instincts tell me that . . . if that lightning was . . . mayhaps it could’ve been . . . if you think about it . . .”

Luckily, another humming sound saved her. Sato looked to his right just in time to see a light green, marble square settle into place after rotating. An instant later, Rutger appeared, sitting on his bum in his black pants and black shirt, looking as frightened as Sato had ever seen him.

“What happened?” he yelled, scrambling to get his short legs under him. He looked so much like a huge ball pitching back and forth on two sticks that Sato worried what Lisa would think. He’d grown quite fond of Rutger, despite the constant teasing, and he always worried when the short man met new people. But Lisa seemed completely at ease, and his esteem for her went up another notch.

Before anyone could answer Rutger’s inquiry, another humming sounded. Sato didn’t look around in time to see the marble rotate, but about forty feet behind him, Tollaseat had appeared.

Windasill’s shriek of delight had barely pierced the air when there came another humming. Then another. Then another. Sato was spinning in circles trying to catch sight of all the flipping tiles. People appeared each time, people he didn’t know. Most of them were tall like Mothball and obviously from the Fifth. Hum, hum, hum—the sound blended together into a resonating vibration that strangely soothed his nerves.

Suddenly it was like musical popcorn. More and more and more marble

slabs spun in ninety degrees all around him, changing colors as they did so, while a stunned, often dirty, sometimes injured person winked into existence on top. Sato finally quit trying to take it all in and instead focused on Mothball, then Rutger. Both of them were gawking at the strange sight around them, but Lisa was staring straight at him.

She raised her eyebrows in an unspoken question.

“You know I don’t know what’s going on,” Sato said. “Let’s just hope none of these people are maniacs bent on killing us.”

“I just don’t . . .” She trailed off, her eyes focusing on something past Sato’s shoulder. They widened in surprise, then shock, then a huge smile wiped the anguish and confusion off her face.

“What?” he asked, already turning to see what she’d discovered.

Lisa shrieked with joy, brushing past him and sprinting toward a group of shorter people—compared to the Fifths anyway—a heavysset man, a brown-haired woman, and a little girl.

It had to be Kayla. And Tick’s parents, too.

Sato hurried after Lisa, feeling a rush of excitement at meeting Tick’s family, somehow putting out of his mind that they were all standing in an impossible place with no explanation of how they’d gotten there.

Lisa reached her family and practically tackled Kayla, pulling her into a tight embrace and twirling her around. Their mom and dad soon joined in, a group of entwined arms, jumping up and down and laughing. It was one of the sweetest things Sato had ever seen.

When he reached them, he stopped, wondering if maybe he should’ve left them alone to their reunion.

Lisa saw him and broke apart from the vise of her dad’s arms. “Mom, Dad—this is Tick’s friend Sato.” She reached out and grabbed his arm, pulling him closer for the introductions.

“I’m Edgar,” her dad said, taking Sato’s hand and shaking it vigorously. “I don’t know where we are or how we got here, but I’m honored to meet one of my son’s partners in crime.”

“Nice . . . nice to meet you,” Sato managed to mumble. Everything suddenly felt like a dream.

Tick’s mom pulled Sato into a long hug, then looked at him as she squeezed his shoulders. “I’m Lorena, and it’s an honor indeed. Atticus told us about your parents and what happened to them. I was so sorry to hear the news. Your mom and I were dear, dear friends for many years. But after I left the Realitants, I had no choice but to lose touch with her. It has been one of the biggest regrets of my life.”

Sato raised his eyebrows. “Why’d you have to do that? Why couldn’t you stay friends?”

Lorena looked at the ground for a second, a flash of fear on her face. But then she returned her gaze to him and her eyes were filled with resolve. “Because Jane said she’d kill me if I ever contacted a Realitant again. She was scared I’d tell them about the Thirteenth Reality before she was ready.”

The Only Hope

Tick spent a long minute simply staring at the shifting faces of the glowing Haunce. Their eyes stared back, full of scrutiny and concern, waiting to hear his reaction to the pronouncement that Tick was the only one who could save the Realities from ripping apart and ceasing to exist forever. No pressure, right?

He decided to show how much he'd grown up in the last year or so. "Okay. I'm not gonna sit here and waste time. It's hard for me to believe I could do anything to stop or reverse what Jane's done. But you obviously know what you're talking about—I mean, you're a billion ghosts crammed into the space of a water heater. That's a lot of brains. So what am I supposed to do?"

The Haunce laughed just as its face morphed into that of a young woman with dark eyes. The sound was like electronic music. When the face changed to an old man with a mustache, the Haunce began speaking again. "No brains here, Atticus. At least not physically. But our combined knowledge is here all the same, stored on countless imprints of soulakens. But there will be time for school lessons later. You are correct that we should not waste any more time. We must get to the heart of the matter, and quickly."

Tick nodded, half-fascinated and half-terrified of what he was about to hear.

The Haunce continued, the faces forever shifting. "Atticus, we have been observing the Realities for many years—living them, breathing them, *being* them. We exist in the boundaries and seams that keep the Realities together and apart, united but separate, all things balanced as they should be. At times, we have intervened, but only in extreme cases of need. Never before has the need been so great as it is now.

"The seams are splitting. Dark matter is consuming them, triggering chain reactions of heightened entropy and introducing fragmentation on a level never seen. We believe there is only one way to stop it."

"How does it involve me?" Tick asked.

The Haunce's current face—a boy, maybe only ten years old—frowned at the interruption, then the expression smoothed away like rippling water. "As we said, we have been observing the Realities for countless centuries. And in all that time, there have been only two people with a concentration of soulakens and Chi'karda levels similar to ours. You are one of those people,

Atticus. And Mistress Jane is the other. We do not yet understand how the two of you came to possess this power or why you both came to exist in the same period of time. But it will take your combined powers to reverse what has happened today.”

Tick had to bite his lip. He wanted to shout a million questions, refute the Haunce’s words. If saving the Realities depended on him *and* Jane—depended on their cooperation—then the battle was over before it had begun.

The glowing orb of the Haunce flexed, as if taking a deep breath. “We must rebind the seams of the Realities and restore stability to the inner workings of quantum physics. To do so, we will need to harness an unprecedented amount of Chi’karda. And to do that, we will need four components.”

The Haunce paused, and Tick felt the agony of each passing second.

“In all of the Realities of the Multiverse there is a place where the Chi’karda levels are exponentially higher than at any other place. So concentrated, in fact, it makes the Realitant headquarters in the Bermuda Triangle look like a spark of static compared to a lightning storm. You and Mistress Jane must join us there.”

“Is it the place in the desert?” Tick asked. “Where Jane had that black tree? The dark matter, the Blade of Shattered Hope?”

The Haunce—now showing the face of an older, homely woman—slowly shook its head. “No. Jane chose that spot because it best fit her needs for linking the different elements of the Blade. Because she had an Alterant of herself in the same place in all thirteen Realities, it was more a matter of the substance of the Blade than it was of Chi’karda.”

“Then where do we have to go?” Tick was saving the biggest and most obvious question for last: How in the world would they get Jane to cooperate with them?

“There’s a place in the Thirteenth Reality where . . .” The Haunce faltered. The face of an Indian woman, the red dot on her forehead looking almost black against the blue glow of her skin, wore a look of complete sadness. “It is a place of atrocities and horror. We are sorry; it is hard for us to talk about it.” Another long pause.

Tick didn’t know if he wanted to hear the answer. After millennia of observing the world and all the things humans had done—both good and bad—the Haunce was having difficulty talking about a place to which Tick had to go. The thought was terrifying.

The Haunce finally continued, the look of sadness now draped across the face of a young Asian man. “We do not know why evil things have always been drawn to this particular spot in the Thirteenth Reality. There have been thousands upon

thousands of deaths there—perhaps millions. The Chi’karda levels created by those tragedies is unsurpassed.”

Tick swallowed a big lump, then took a guess. “It’s where Jane’s castle is, isn’t it?”

The eyes of a little girl met Tick’s. “No. Not there. Somewhere much, much worse.”

Tick waited.

“The place we must gather,” the Haunce said, seeming to have recovered its composure a little, “and where you must bring Jane, is . . . the Factory.”

“The Factory?” Tick repeated.

The Haunce nodded. “Yes. It is the place where Jane manufactures her creatures. Her abominations. It is a hideous, wretched place full of death and tortured souls. But also the site of massive amounts of Chi’karda.”

“And what do we do once we get there?” Tick asked. He was trying not to think too much about what a creepy and horrible place the Factory must be. “Assuming that we somehow convince Jane to come with us and do what we ask, I mean.”

The pulsing, silver-blue orb of the Haunce moved several feet across the floor and back again, as if pacing, deep in thought. “The task you and Jane must do is simple. Both of you need to concentrate and summon every ounce of Chi’karda you can. Gather as much as you can, and then you must channel to us. Our job will be to harness the power and combine it with the Chi’karda that already exists within the Factory.”

The Haunce quit pacing and took another one of those deep breaths. “Once we have gathered enough power, we will bleed the Chi’karda through the cracks of space and time, binding the seals of the Realities that are currently rupturing. Quite honestly, the task could destroy us, but we believe we can save the Multiverse before that happens. Before we ourselves cease to exist.”

Tick didn’t know what to think. The whys and hows didn’t matter so much at the moment, and he couldn’t pretend to feel a pang of potential loss at hearing that the Haunce might die in the act. Especially if the Haunce’s sacrifice would save thirteen entire worlds—and his family. But still, hearing it all poured out so short and sweet when so much was on the line was dizzying.

“Do you have anything to say?” the Haunce asked, now showing the face of a pretty girl about Tick’s age.

“Not a thing,” Tick responded. “I don’t know what else I can do but trust you. If you say we can do this, then let’s do it. I guess the first thing is to figure out how to get Jane to play along. I’m sure once we tell her what’s about to happen, she’ll have to. I mean, how could she want everything to disappear, including her? That’d be beyond stupid.”

“We can only hope.” The Haunce morphed into an old woman. “There is one final thing to say before we begin. You must know that a lull has occurred in the fragmentation of the Realities. For the moment, they are safe. And so is your family. But . . .”

Tick felt a thrilling rush of joy as he realized that somehow he’d known all along that his family was safe. The relief lasted only a second before being tempered. “But?” he repeated, thinking, *What now?*

The face of a small boy responded. “But we have only thirty hours until the fragmentation begins again. And when it does, it will not stop until all that we know ceases to exist.”

Part 3

The Fifth Army

A Bowl of Debris

Sofia lay on her back, staring at the twilight sky of the desert, the deep blue just beginning its fade to purple. No clouds. A throbbing pain pulsed somewhere inside her skull—something had knocked her out. Something had hit her in the head during the chaos right after Tick disappeared.

Tick disappeared!

She forced herself into a sitting position, groaning at the thunder of pain it ignited. She coughed, a dry rasp that hurt her throat. She needed water. Badly. The natural rock formations of Jane's secret spot still surrounded them, though several chunks had broken off and tumbled to the dusty ground during the earthquake. The tables and screens and computers used by Jane's people lay scattered and smashed, strewn about like abandoned toys. The air smelled burnt.

Twisting her head around, she searched for signs of her friends. She felt a fleeting moment of panic when she didn't see them at first, but it quickly vanished when movement under a collapsed table caught her attention. Master George, his nice suit filthy and torn, was wiggling his way out from under the heavy slab of the table. Paul sat a few feet from him, his arms wrapped around his knees, staring into the distance with a blank expression.

"You guys okay?" Sofia asked.

"They all vanished," Paul said, not bothering to look at her. "Jane first, and then everyone else right after. Zip, zip, zip. Zippity gone, just like that. Left us here to die, I guess."

"I'm actually quite surprised." Master George grunted. He finally freed himself from the confining rubble and stood up, dusting himself off. "She went to all that trouble to kidnap us, and then she simply ran away? Odd."

Sofia disagreed. "I don't think it's that weird. Somehow Tick winked away, or someone took him, whatever. But without him, she didn't have what she needed anymore. It's *his* family she took after all."

"It's not even that," Paul said in a subdued voice, still staring at the rock walls like he'd been hypnotized.

Sofia scooted a little closer to him. "What are you talking about?"

"Look at that." Paul finally blinked and pointed to the middle of the depression where the black tree—the Blade of Shattered Hope—had been. It was gone, replaced by a small crater. The ground was blackened and charred,

some of the desert sand actually glistening where the heat had transformed it to glass. “I think something went wrong with what that freak Jane was trying to do. Really, really wrong. She doesn’t care about us anymore. She ran away to try to fix whatever it is she messed up.”

Sofia stared at the dark scar of a hole and slowly nodded as she thought about what he’d said. Paul was right. The earthquake had been horrible, and all of Jane’s people had run around screaming, falling down, and crawling over each other as they looked for a way to escape. Things had obviously not gone according to plan.

“That certainly sounds reasonable,” Master George said. “What I wouldn’t give to know what exactly happened here today. All that nonsense about dark matter. Perhaps it wasn’t quite rubbish after all.”

“Dark matter,” Paul muttered in disgust; Sofia shared the sentiment. “I don’t give a patooty about any of that stuff right now. All I want is a chance to put my hands around Jane’s neck and squeeze.”

Sofia felt her eyebrows rise in surprise. “A little violent this evening, aren’t we?”

Paul looked at her for the first time since she’d come to, and she couldn’t help but lean back a couple of inches before stopping herself. His eyes were full of fury and hatred. There was no sign of the normally lighthearted, joking Paul.

Sofia felt a deep anger inside of her, too. “Just kidding. I’d like to do that myself.”

Master George walked over to Paul and offered a hand. “All in due time, Master Paul. All in due time. For now, we need to find water—or we won’t live long enough to put our hands around a sandwich, much less Mistress Jane.”

Paul ignored the offer of help, but did stand up, his face still tensed in anger. Sofia pushed herself up as well, and the three of them began searching through the debris. Jane’s people had to have brought plenty of food and water if they planned on being out here for any significant amount of time. It took only a few minutes to find the stash.

Several coolers with bread, meat, fruit, and big, glass bottles of water—most of which had been packed tightly enough that they hadn’t broken in the chaos—had been wedged between a toppled table and some large computer equipment.

Sofia drank half a bottle of water, trickles of the liquid splashing down her cheeks and onto her clothes. Even though the water was warm, she was sure she’d never tasted anything so refreshing in her life.

They didn’t dare eat the meat, but the bread and fruit seemed okay, and soon they were all sitting together in one of the few spots clear of wreckage,

enjoying their odd little meal. The sun had sunk even further, the shadows from the towering rocks stretching all the way across the desert bowl. Full darkness would be upon them soon.

Sofia hated the thought of being in the middle of a desert in the Thirteenth Reality at nighttime. “Guys, this is great to eat and rest a little, but what’re we gonna do next? It’ll be totally dark soon.”

“We’ll probably get eaten alive by fangen,” Paul said, neither his voice nor his face revealing any sign that he was kidding. “Jane’s probably already sent some out here to hunt us.”

Sofia wanted the old Paul back. “You’re real great to have around when things get rough,” she said. “You really know how to look on the bright side.”

Paul shrugged and took a big bite of an apple, wiping the juice on his sleeve.

“There are much worse things than fangen,” Master George said with a doomsday voice.

Sofia stared at him, surprised and curious. He returned her look, his eyes squinting despite the fading light. When he said nothing, she finally asked, “What makes you say that?”

Master George glanced at Paul, then looked away toward the western wall of the bowl, now draped in shadow. “Our spies have learned a lot about Jane’s extracurricular activities these past months. She has a place called the Factory, located in one of the heaviest Chi’karda spots ever discovered. Word is she’s created things far more hideous than her precious fangen. Far worse. More vicious by a long shot.”

“What are they?” Paul asked.

Sofia found it hard to believe something could be worse than those flying, snarling, diseased, sharp-toothed monsters.

“She hasn’t brought them out for full usage yet,” Master George said. “We’ve caught only bare glimpses and heard rumors. But her work in using nature to create nature has gone beyond anything you or I could dare scrape up in a campfire tale. Evil, evil things. We think she is also working to isolate the soulikens of . . . very bad people from the past.”

Soulikens. Sofia had heard the word before, but she’d never pursued its meaning because of countless other things that seemed more important. Master George continued before she could voice her question.

“I haven’t told you much about soulikens, because I myself didn’t know enough. But I’ve spent every spare second since we last said good-bye researching the phenomenon. It might be the most fascinating thing I’ve ever studied—everything from the fundamentals of natural electricity and its role within human biology to old tales and rumors of ghost stories.”

“Well, what *is* it?” Paul asked in an impatient voice. “What’s a souliken?”

The sun seemed to finally disappear for good in that moment, the sky darkening as if all the light had been frightened away. When Master George turned his gaze to Sofia, she almost gasped out loud at how creepy he looked with the angles of his face deep in shadow.

“Soulikens are your eternal stamp on reality,” he said. “They are the means by which you’ll haunt the world far after you’ve rotted to dust and bone.”

And then, for some odd reason, the old man laughed.

Making Plans

Thirty hours?” Tick asked, hating how that sounded both long and short at the same time. “We have only thirty hours to save the entire universe?”

The silver-blue glow of the Haunce flared a bit then subsided. “Thirty hours or thirty years—it would not make a difference. There is not much we can do to prepare, and it might even be worse if we did have the time to try. The problem will be convincing Mistress Jane to cooperate. Once you accomplish that, all that will be left is our attempt to rebind the Realities and reseal the barriers.”

Tick felt a bubble in his stomach as he shook his head in disbelief. “Once *I* accomplish it? You really think Jane is gonna trust me for even one second? You’ll have to talk to her, not me.”

The face of an old man frowned back at him. “We are sorry, Atticus. Our ability to appear in this form is extremely difficult to maintain. Once we leave here, neither you nor anyone else will see us again until the moment we make our attempt. The task of having Jane join us is entirely up to you.”

Tick didn’t say anything for a minute, trying to process the new information and its potential ramifications. He felt an incredible amount of pressure draped across his shoulders like an iron shawl.

Finally, he said, “Okay, look. I don’t know how I can possibly do that. I’m not even sure I understand what it is I’m supposed to do. But you said something about my family being safe. I need to hear about that right now. How do you know they’re okay?”

A woman with a big nose responded. “As Jane was building her cache of dark matter and assembling her Blade of Shattered Hope, we watched carefully. We normally do not interfere with the realm of living humans. It is not our place. If Jane had destroyed the Fifth Reality, we would have been shocked and horrified, but we would not have stopped her. However, when the chain reactions that could end all existence were ignited, we no longer had a choice.”

Tick groaned on the inside, doubly annoyed. Both at the long non-answer about his family and the fact that the Haunce would sit back and let an entire world be destroyed. “What does this have to do with my family?” he asked.

An annoyed buzz sounded from the ghostly creature. “We hope your impatience will serve you well since we will have little time left together. No

more interruptions. We will not be able to appear in this form much longer.”

The glow changed into three faces before Tick finally nodded.

“Good,” the Haunce continued. “When the barriers began to break and the seals began to split, we knew immediately what we must do. We winked you here to Reality Prime, where we would be able to discuss things in private. We also winked your family away from Jane’s prison, as well as a number of people from the Fifth Reality who were located in the area of your Realitant friends—Mothball, Rutger, and Sato. They are together in a special holding place we created long ago—a sort of way station that exists in a quasi-Reality that only we know about.”

“What about—” Tick stopped himself, not wanting to interrupt again.

“Your other friends?” the Haunce asked. “Sofia, Paul, and your Realitant leader, Master George?”

Tick nodded.

“They are in the Thirteenth Reality, where you last saw them.”

Tick couldn’t remain silent any more. “Why didn’t you take them to the same place as my family?”

The face of the Haunce flowed from an ugly woman to a pretty one, then morphed into a man with beady eyes. “They remain in the Thirteenth, because that is where you are going. You will need their help. You will be together very soon, though you will not have much time for happy reunions.”

“Okay, so what do I need to know?” Tick asked, surprised at how steady he felt. He was ready to have this whole mess done and over with.

~

No one had spoken since Master George’s explanation of soulikens. Sofia continued to sit still, staring at the dark shadow of a wall standing a few dozen feet from her. The sounds of the desert were soft and faint—an insect here and there, the sigh of the wind, sand scratching across rock.

When Paul spoke up, it startled her. She hoped he hadn’t noticed her jump.

“Soulikens,” he said. “Basically you’re telling us that throughout our lives we create these freaky electronic imprints on the world that never go away but hang around us like a fog, building and building until it kind of becomes our ghost. Is that what you’re telling us? That ghosts are real?”

“If you could see on a quantum level,” Master George responded, “you’d see an aura of energy around you and others that very much resembled exactly that. A ghost.”

Sofia felt a little creeped out. “Then I don’t wanna see on a quantum level. I hate scary movies, and I hate ghosts.”

“Now who’s the cheerful one?” Paul asked.

“You rubbed off on me.”

“I love scary movies. Especially the ones where lots of people die.”

Sofia couldn't help but feel happy that the old Paul was starting to come back. “Call me crazy, but I prefer my movies to have the slightest hint of intelligence.”

“When all this is over,” Paul said, “check out *Steve the Slashing Monkey* and tell me that movie doesn't *bleed* intelligence.”

Sofia couldn't stop before a snort of laughter came out.

“I knew it!” Paul yelled, his voice echoing off the rock walls. “I knew I could make you laugh!”

“You two are driving me mad,” Master George muttered. “I believe I'm quite ready to get some sleep.”

“But what're we gonna do?” Paul asked him. “Can't you get someone to wink us out of this stinkin' place?”

“Sorry, old chap. If someone hasn't winked us by now, then there's obviously been a break in communication. Jane brought us here, remember, and her shield must still be working. And I don't have my Barrier Wand. I assure you, Sally's doing his very best to find us.”

Great, Sofia thought. They had to spend the night in the middle of the desert, with no telling how many creatures of Mistress Jane lurking about. *Just great.*

“Well,” Paul said, “at least it's not cold. I bet we can find some soft sand to snuggle in, Sofia. You in?”

Sofia leaned closer to him and smacked him on the arm. It felt so wonderful that she did it again.

Paul jumped to his feet and ran away, snickering as he rubbed his sore spot. “Man, for a chick who's a scaredy-cat of scary movies, you sure do know how to punch.”

“I was glad you'd gotten over your sour mood,” Sofia responded as she started looking around for her own place to get some rest, feeling with her hands mostly. “But now that you're back to normal, I kind of miss the grumpy Paul after all.”

“I love you too.”

She'd just found a nice spot of open sand when a slight thump in the air sounded behind her. It was barely noticeable, and she almost felt it more than heard it. She whipped around to see what had happened.

A shadowy figure of a boy stood between her and Paul, a hump of a backpack on his shoulders. When he turned and faced her, the starlight revealed his face just enough.

“Tick!” she cried, scrambling to her feet and running to him. Paul reached him just as she did, and they all joined in a group hug. When she finally

pulled back, she said, “What happened? Where’d you go?”

“And how’d you get back here?” Paul added.

Master George joined them. “Atticus! Speak, man, speak!”

Tick laughed a little, though it didn’t hold much humor. “Calm down, guys. It’s a long story, and we don’t have much time to talk. We have to get moving. I’ll tell you everything on the go.”

“Get moving?” Sofia asked, feeling a slight chill. “Where are we supposed to go?”

“Some place called the Factory,” Tick answered. “It’s full of Mistress Jane’s little monster pets. But don’t worry. We have a billion ghosts to help us out.”

Reunions

Tick didn't want to waste a single minute. When the Haunce outlined the plan for what they needed to do to stop the fragmenting of the Realities, one thing bled through all the others: they needed to hurry.

Tick had less than thirty hours to get to the Factory, convince Mistress Jane to help—after getting her there in the first place, of course—then summon all the Chi'karda he could to help the Haunce rebind the barriers of the Realities.

No problem. Then why did he have the terrible feeling that nothing would go right along the way?

Sofia, Paul, and Master George stood in front of him in the darkness. The starlight was not strong enough to reveal their faces, but Tick could imagine the looks of surprise and confusion.

"Seriously," he said. "We need to go. We're gonna be winked in five minutes."

"Whoa," Paul said, his upraised hands mere shafts of shadow. "I'm not takin' a single step till you elaborate on this whole ghost business."

"A *billion* ghosts," Sofia added. "What was that all about?"

Tick was about to answer when Master George made an unpleasant harrumphing sound.

"What?" Tick asked.

"You met the Haunce, didn't you?" the old man responded. Tick could barely see him shaking his head. "I've met it only once in my life, and if I ever do again, you can bet your bottoms I'm going to have a word or two with it about holding back vital information about soulikens and all that."

Tick felt a flutter of confusion, but Sofia spoke up before he could.

"The Haunce? What's that? And why would it know everything about soulikens?"

Tick's confusion increased. "You guys know about soulikens?"

"You mean *you* do?" Paul responded.

Tick nodded even though he doubted they could see him. "The Haunce told me about them."

"What is the Haunce?" Sofia shouted.

For some reason a chuckle burst out of Tick. "We sound like the dumbest people who've ever lived." He remembered the urgency of what they had to do. "But come on—we really need to go. The Haunce wants us to stand at the

spot where the Blade of Shattered Hope tree thingy was.”

“Why?” all three of them asked in unison.

“He—*it’s* going to wink us closer to the Factory. We can sort things out once we get there. Come on—can you tell where the Blade used to be?”

“Over this way,” Paul muttered. “Doesn’t sound like a good time to start doubting Superman Atticus Higgin-bottom.”

Paul’s shadow moved past him and started walking toward the central area of the dark stone walls surrounding them. Tick followed and heard Sofia and Master George right behind him.

Tick tripped twice over debris and stepped on things that clanged and snapped. The place must’ve gotten really messed up after he’d been winked away.

Paul finally stopped in an open spot and turned to face the rest of the group. “Pretty sure it was right about here. But be careful—some of the sand turned into glass shards.”

Tick felt the crunch under his shoes, smelled something burnt. When they were all standing in a circle, he reached out and took Sofia’s hand, then Paul’s. “The Haunce told me we need to hold hands. It’s easier that way.”

Tick was glad they didn’t argue. Sofia took Master George’s hand, and then the old man took Paul’s. Standing there in the dark desert with the slight breeze sighing as it passed over the towering rocks, Tick felt a major case of the creeps, like they were about to begin a séance.

“Okay!” he shouted. “Wink us away, Haunce!” The words sounded incredibly stupid, but he wanted to get this part over with. He had no idea what to expect once they got to where they were going.

Before this last thought even fully formed in his mind, the tingle shot across his neck and down his spine.

~

It had been a strange hour for Sato.

There’d been the reunion of Tick’s family—without Tick, unfortunately—as well as hearing more details about Mrs. Higginbottom (a.k.a. Lorena) and her brief stint as a Realitant. Sato had been amazed to learn that she and Mistress Jane had been partners of a sort in exploring and seeking out new Realities, and they’d been together when the Thirteenth was discovered. They’d realized that something was special about it right away, and how odd properties of Chi’karda ran rampant there.

It was the first time Jane had started to show the dual signs of her thirst for power and her edge of obsession with the idea of a Utopian Reality. When Jane threatened Lorena if she dared tell anyone about their discovery, that had been the last straw. Lorena decided to call it quits, realizing she wasn’t cut out for that kind of life—namely being killed by a crazy woman.

Sato eventually drifted away from the Higginbottoms. He suspected they probably wanted some time to themselves to bask in the joy of being together again. And, he admitted to himself, it hurt to see such a thing. It painfully reminded him that he'd lost his own parents, and that such a get-together would be impossible for him. It hurt, and he left them before it became unbearable.

But that's when things had really gotten strange for him.

There were several hundred people from the Fifth Reality in the strange space, all of them winked in from the general location of where Mothball's parents lived. How that had happened was beyond anyone's guess, but they'd mostly gotten over their shock and just generally reveled in the fact that they were still alive.

Or, Sato figured, at least they hoped that was the case. The bizarre place to which they'd been sent didn't seem like anything in the normal world. Maybe they *had* died and been sent to an afterlife. Who knew? Sato didn't want to think about it until he absolutely had to.

Once all the people from the Fifth settled in, they began to notice him. They began to see the resemblance he had to their recently assassinated Grand Minister. His Alterant. And now they surrounded him completely, a huge crowd of giants, all of them staring at him, waiting for him to speak. But he refused, sitting cross-legged with his chin resting on his closed fists. Mothball had to get him out of this. She had to do something! If not her, then her parents.

But they seemed to be enjoying the spectacle, along with Rutger. The four of them sat outside the crowd somewhere—he'd lost sight of them a good half hour earlier.

Sato buried his face in his hands and groaned, hoping everyone heard the scream of frustration barely veiled within it.

~

The first thing Tick noticed was that the air was much cooler, laced with a wetness almost as thick as mist. Then he saw the tall, looming poles of shadow all around them—trees. Lots and lots of trees.

They were back in the Forest of Plague—the place they'd come a year ago on a mission to steal Mistress Jane's Barrier Wand. This time they'd be going in the opposite direction; the Factory lay due east, according to the Haunce.

Tick felt the reassuring grip of Sofia's and Paul's hands in his own. "You guys okay?"

"Still in one piece," Master George answered from a few feet in front of him. Tick couldn't see his face very well. In fact, he couldn't see much except for the trees and the dark shapes of his fellow Realitants.

"Fine," Paul grumbled. "At least it's not hot here. My pits are in desperate

need of some deodorant.”

Sofia sighed. “Pleasant as always.”

“Okay, so where are we?” Paul asked.

“Yes, Atticus,” Master George added. “No more time for hasting about until you answer some questions. Where are we? What’s behind all this?”

Tick felt surprisingly calm despite the clock winding down inside his mind; he didn’t have the heart to look at his watch. He knew the calm wouldn’t last long. He knew terrible things lay ahead.

“Tick?” Paul prodded. “Speak up—can’t hear ya.”

“Alright, listen,” Tick began. “I’ll explain everything, but then we gotta get going. Jane screwed up the whole universe with her dark-matter tree—that stupid Blade of Shattered Hope. The barriers keeping the Realities whole and bound together are fragmenting, breaking apart. Right now there’s a lull, but the Haunce says in twenty-something hours from now, it’ll all snap, blow up, disintegrate. In no time at all, everything will cease to exist. That’s how the Haunce put it.”

“I feared the worst,” Master George whispered, a deathly rasp. “However, this is beyond even what I cooked up in my head. But if the Haunce told you as much, then it’s true.”

Tick nodded despite the darkness. “It thinks we can fix the problem somehow, but it’ll take me, Mistress Jane, and the Haunce itself together in the biggest Chi’karda spot in all the Realities. Which is this Factory place a few miles to the east of here.”

“Oh, goodness gracious me,” Master George said. The others stayed silent, maybe too shocked for words.

“Anyway,” Tick said, “we can talk more about the details, but the Haunce wants me to do a quick job first.” Tick reached into his pocket and pulled out the short metal message tube Master George had given him earlier. “First, it wants me to send an important note to somebody—wink it, actually.”

“Wink it?” Sofia repeated. “You mean . . .”

Tick held up the tube between his thumb and forefinger, barely able to see the silver shine of its smooth surface. “Yeah. The Haunce wants me to wink it with my so-called powers. Called it . . . *practice*.”

Sending a Message

Tick finally remembered that he'd packed a flashlight before leaving his house. He swung his backpack off and pulled it out, then clicked it on. The light reflected off the silvery surface of the metal tube, making it look like a valuable piece of jewelry.

"Atticus," Master George said as he moved closer and put a hand on Tick's shoulder. "Listen to me carefully. I want you to describe what the Haunce looked like. Once I'm absolutely sure this all came from our strange and powerful friend, I promise I won't doubt another word you say."

Tick let the flashlight tip downward until it illuminated the leaf-strewn forest floor. "It was a big, silver-blue oval of pulsing light, with hundreds of faces replacing each other in the middle of it, their mouths forming the words as it talked to me. Creeped me out big time."

Master George nodded as his eyes focused on the ground. "Indeed. Indeed. It's hard to put into words what it means that the Haunce visited you, Atticus. There's no longer any doubt that there is something special about you, something extraordinary. Especially if the Haunce thinks you can wink this message away without the use of a Barrier Wand."

"Yeah, well, we'll see," Tick said. He shone the flashlight under his chin to make his face look scary. "You both can think I'm special all you want, but let's see if I can actually do it."

"You *are* special," Paul said, not bothering to hide his sarcasm. "You're so special."

"He *is*," Sofia snapped. "Be quiet and let him concentrate. Do it, Tick. Show him. Show us what you can do."

Paul snickered, evidently thinking his joke was hilarious. "I'm just playin', man. Sheesh. What's the note in there say, anyway? And who are you sending it to?"

"It's for Sally—" Master George began, but Tick cut him off.

"No, it's not."

"What do you mean? You changed it?"

Tick shone the light on the silver tube still clasped in his other hand. "Had to. The Haunce said we had no chance of getting all the Realitants together in time to help us. They're spread all over the place, dealing with the earthquakes and junk that happened when everything went wrong."

“Then who’s it for?” Sofia asked.

“It’s a note for someone who already has a bunch of people gathered, ready to fight the first bad thing that walks in front of them.” Tick paused, needlessly adding drama to the revelation, just for kicks. “It’s for Sato.”

~

Sato ignored every word spoken to him and every tap on his shoulder until he heard the voice of Lisa.

“Sato?” she asked. “You okay?”

He looked up to see she’d maneuvered her way through the tightly packed crowd. She stood in front of him, leaning down with her hands on her knees, looking at him with concern creasing her pretty face. The fact that she cared one whit made him feel a little better.

“I guess so,” he replied. He swept his eyes across the tall people of the Fifth who were packing in tighter and tighter around him, still gawking and pointing. “I just don’t know what they want. I’m not who they think I am—they have to *know* that! What do they expect me to do? Pretend I’m their leader raised from the dead?”

Lisa knelt down, the movement causing her blonde curls to bounce on her shoulders. “We all thought it was kind of cute until you put your head down and ignored them. Why don’t you come over and sit with my family? Maybe that’ll make them leave you alone.”

Sato shook his head slowly as he considered her offer. How stupid was this? These people fawning over him were the least of his worries. Where were they and how were they going to get out of there?

“Sato?” Lisa asked. “You want me to—”

“No, no, sorry,” he said. “I was just thinking that we need to figure out what’s going on around here. I need to talk to Rutger and Mothball. Figure out if we can get in touch with the other Realitants somehow.”

Lisa nodded. “Okay, sounds good. Why don’t you . . .” She paused, looked around quickly, then focused back on him. “Tell you what—I’ll get their attention so you can sneak off or something.”

“Get their attention? How’re you gonna do that?”

Lisa straightened, rubbing her hands together as if planning something evil. “I can be a brat when I need to be—ask Tick. I’ll think of something brilliant to make them leave you alone.”

Sato stood to join her, wincing at the gasps of anticipation his action elicited from the crowd. “Okay, fine by me. Good luck with that.” He started through the crowd of Fifth citizens standing between him and his Realitant friends.

“You people listen up!” he heard Lisa shout from behind him. “Sato will

be right back. He has to, um, go use the bathroom.”

Sato stopped for half a second, thinking, *That is the best she can come up with?* But then he pushed on, making his way toward Mothball and Rutger.

~

Tick did his best to explain what the Haunce had said about Sato and the others being taken to some kind of way station anomaly in the Realities for safekeeping. But it was kind of hard when he didn't really understand it himself.

“What *is* this place?” Paul asked. “*Where* is it?”

“I don't know!” Tick practically shouted, though he toned it down to a rough whisper on the last word. They couldn't risk Jane's creations finding them yet. “All we care about is that they're all safe—including my family, thank goodness—and that the Haunce is gonna move them very soon. Which is why I need to hurry. As soon as I get this note winked, we'll have time to talk about stuff while we walk toward the Factory.” Annoyed, Tick pointed the flashlight in Paul's face. “Okay?”

Paul reached out, flailing with his hands. “Alright, dude, get on with it!”

“Yes, Atticus,” Master George pitched in. “I'm very anxious to see what you're about to do. Quite anxious indeed. And when we're done, I'd love to hear more about this hideaway spot in the Realities you mentioned.”

Sofia reached out and lightly punched Tick in the arm. “We'll leave you alone, now. Do your thing. I can't wait to see it.”

Tick had a sudden rush of terror. He had no idea what he was about to do—or even where to begin. The Haunce had left him with some parting words of advice—mainly about envisioning a conduit between him and Sato and opening an imaginary slice through space and time. But mostly, he was supposed to sit back and let his power do its thing. He needed to believe in it and let the Chi'karda take his vision of need and manifest it for him.

His mind knew what it wanted. His heart did as well. He had all the power he needed, waiting for a spark to set it boiling. All the ingredients were there, even if he couldn't lay out the scientific formulas on any chalkboard no matter how many times he tried. It was all there. The need, the ability, the power.

He just had to set it in motion.

He just had to believe.

“Tick, you waitin' on something?” Paul asked.

Sofia shushed him. “Seriously, Paul, shut up!”

“Sorry,” he whispered.

Tick barely heard the exchange, but realized he was standing completely still, staring at some dark point in the distant woods. Giving his head a little

shake, he knelt down on the ground, feeling the prick of a twig. Then he heard it snap, along with the crunch of leaves. He placed the flashlight on the ground, still lit, and brought the silver tube up with both hands to look at it, turning the thing slowly between his fingers.

Now or never, he told himself.

Now or never.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and urged a sea of calm to wash across his body. He thought back to his two main encounters with Chi'karda, the times when he'd actually been able to see it visually.

Sparkling, orange clouds of mist.

Heat.

Raging, burning heat.

Something flickered inside him. He'd found the spark. It grew, warming him from the inside out. Surprisingly, it didn't terrify him. It felt more like comfort.

He squeezed his eyes tighter and threw all of his concentration into his thoughts. In the amoebas of darkness swirling there, he tried to form a picture of Sato. Different images kept flashing in his mind, different faces. Tick tried harder. The face of his friend wavered, then held. Unbelievably clear, it was like a photo had been implanted in his brain. Tick almost opened his eyes in shock.

But he controlled himself, focusing on keeping the picture clear. Sato. He thought of the silver tube, clearly told . . . who?—himself? maybe the Chi'karda itself—that he wanted that tube to dissolve into the quantum realm, travel through spacetime, and reach his friend.

The heat increased, forcing beads of sweat to break out all over his skin. He didn't dare look, but he knew that misty swirls of orange were floating around his body, lighting the darkness of the forest with an eerie glow. He held onto that vision of Sato and onto the precise and clear thought of what he wanted to happen.

Then, not quite sure if he was doing the right thing, he formed words inside his mind.

The silver tube. To Sato. He waited. Now.

As a tingling wave sent goose bumps bursting out all over him, he felt the weight of the tube disappear from his hands. He heard Sofia and Paul gasp. Master George shrieked with excitement like an old woman. But Tick didn't truly believe it until he opened his eyes and saw for himself.

The tube was gone.

The message had been sent.

The Way Station

Sato never thought he'd be so happy to see Rutger.

"Why, you look a little uncomfortable!" the short man shouted when Sato finally made it through the crowd to his Realitant friends and Mothball's parents. "I was, uh, just about to come out there and rescue you."

"Yeah, I'm sure you were," Sato muttered.

"They've all taken quite the likin' to you, they 'ave," Mothball said, an enormous grin revealing her big, yellow teeth.

Those two were enjoying this ridiculous scenario way too much, and it was really starting to annoy Sato. "What am I supposed to do? We've all been winked to this psycho place, and those people act like I'm gonna save them or something. Just because I look like their murdered leader. What am I supposed to do?"

Tollaseat and Windasill were holding hands, looking on with pinched up grimaces as if they were embarrassed by the whole affair. Tollaseat reached out—and down—to pat Sato on the shoulder. "There, there, little man. Don't take it the wrong way, and don't be feelin' any pressure 'cause of this lot. We're all a wee bit scared, and a familiar face gives a lift, it does. Even I'll admit you seem like the natural person to take charge 'round these parts."

Windasill laughed, a sound that held nothing but kindness—no hint of mockery or condescension. "Reckon I ruddy agree with me love on that one. Can't you just pretend to lead a bit? Give 'em all a good talkin' to? Bring 'em straight out of the doldrums, you would. I'd bet me own two ears on that."

Sato knew he had to quit whining. Their problems were piling up by the minute, and—

An object appeared in front of his face—instantly, one second not there, the next second there—a small, elongated stretch of shining silver. He barely had time to see it or register what it was before the tube of metal fell. He reached out to catch it, but he didn't move in time. The tube smacked onto the weird marble floor and bounced with a couple of clings and clangs before rolling several inches and coming to a rest next to Rutger's foot.

No one moved for a couple of seconds. Sato could tell they were all staring at the mysterious—and magical—visitor just as he was. He finally gained his wits and leaned over to pick up the tube, turning it this way and that for the others to take a look.

Sato was about to ask what it was when Mothball blurted out, “That there’s one of them fancy message tubes from Master George.”

“Open it!” Rutger yelled, jumping up and down in excitement—maybe reaching a grand height of three millimeters off the ground. “I knew he’d find us! I knew it! Don’t you worry, we’ll be out of here . . .”

He trailed off, a troubled look coming over his face.

Sato had been relieved to get the tube, but now worry swept over him. “What’s wrong?”

“Well, I just . . . It’s . . . well.” Rutger cleared his throat. “It’s just that if he could send us this message, why didn’t he just wink us out of here?”

“Got plenty of worries without lookin’ for fresh ones,” Mothball said. “Open the ruddy thing, Sato, and see what the old man has to say.”

“How do you do it?” Sato asked. He knew George often sent message tubes like these out before, but Sato had never helped him with them or even seen one up close.

“Just pull the ends apart,” Rutger said with an annoyed huff.

“Well, excuse me for not being a message-tube wizard,” Sato griped. Shaking his head, he gripped the two rounded ends of the tube and pulled in opposite directions. A seam appeared and expanded until he held two separate pieces. A rolled up piece of paper slipped out and dropped to the floor.

He snatched it up and unrolled it, so eager his hands were shaking. The tightly coiled note sprung closed twice before he finally got it under control enough that he could open it and read its hand-written contents. He’d barely started before Rutger yelled at him to read it out loud.

“Okay,” Sato said, surprisingly not annoyed at the interruption. He cleared his throat and started from the beginning. “Dear Sato. This is Tick. Mistress Jane did something really bad, and every last Reality is going to roll over and die unless we do something about it. You were taken to that place you’re in by, well, I can explain all that later. You’re safe for now. But a few hours after you get this, you’re gonna be winked to the Thirteenth Reality. All of you. I need you to convince everyone there to come help me.”

Sato paused for a big breath and looked around at his friends, all of whom stared back with wide eyes.

“Keep going!” Rutger snapped.

Sato did. “There’s a place called the Factory. Mothball should know about it. It’s where Jane creates her fangen and some new things that are worse. I’ll be there in a little bit with Master George, Paul, and Sofia. With any luck, we’ll be working with Jane to fix the Realities. Yeah, long story, but we’ll need her help. Anyway, once we’re done, there’s no way Jane will let us go. That’s where you guys come in.”

Sato saw Mothball shake her head back and forth, but he chose to ignore

her for now and kept reading. ““The people of the Fifth are known as warriors—even those who don’t do it as a profession. Somehow you and Mothball need to organize them and convince them to come rescue us. The Haunce—don’t ask—also says there are lots of children we’ll need to save while we’re at it. Sato, you have to come! Be ready so when the Haunce thinks the time is right, it can wink all of you to the Thirteenth.””

Mothball was quietly groaning now—almost wailing—but the note only had a few more sentences. Sato finished up quickly. “I know you have a ton of questions, but there’s no way I can explain everything in a stupid note. I hope you can trust me. The Factory, Sato. The Factory. Come and get us. And just so you know it’s me: remember how mad you were that I saved you twice? Well, it’s payback time. Tick out.”

Sato stared at those last couple of lines for a few seconds. A trickle of doubt had entered his mind upon first reading the note—anybody could’ve sent the note. But now he knew it really was Tick. The tone, the phrasing, the reference to their exchange after Sato had been freed from Chu’s Dark Infinity device—it was Tick, all right.

Mothball let out a sound like a bear with its foot caught in a trap.

Sato looked at her and saw something awful and afraid in her expression. “What’s *wrong* with you?” he asked.

“The Factory,” she replied in a whisper. “Master Tick’s spot on when he says I should know all about it. Know far too much, I do. Sorry to be a pussycat, but if that’s where we’re goin’, then I’m a might scared, that’s all.”

Rutger nodded, his face a full shade paler than it had been before Sato had read the note. “She’s right. Our spies in the Thirteenth have told us all about that nightmare place. I can’t imagine what Tick’s gotten himself into, but if he really is headed for that place of horrors, then we have no choice but to go after him. Just like he asked for. Even though it terrifies me just as much as it does Mothball.” He leaned back to look up at his friend, a ball tilting on a pivot. “In fact, I’m pretty sure I’ve never *seen* you scared before.”

“Hogwash,” she mumbled back.

Sato hadn’t known her nearly as long as Rutger had, but he’d definitely never seen her so afraid—at least nothing even approaching the way she looked now, pallid and sweaty with dead eyes. “Well, what *is* the Factory?” he finally asked. “Why is it so awful?”

“Tell him, Mothball,” Rutger said. “Tell him what they told us.”

The tall Realitant’s eyes flickered down to her friend, then to Sato. She stiffened her body and held her head a little higher, composing herself. “Well, there’s the obvious bit Tick mentioned. Factory’s full of Jane’s hideous creations, guardin’ every last inch of it. But that’s not the worst part. Not worst by far, the way I reckon it. What chills me bones is to think of what

we'll see if we get *inside* the ruddy place. Things unnatural and evil. Things that just might cure of us sleepin' till we drop dead of it."

"Like what?" Sato asked, his curiosity mixed with a chilling fear. "What are they doing in there?"

Mothball pulled her long, gangly arms behind her and clasped her hands as she stared down at her own feet. "They take animals and . . . meld them with other animals, usin' the mutated powers of the Thirteenth's Chi'karda. Meld 'em right together into things you wouldn't dare tell 'round a campfire."

Sato held his breath.

Mothball's head snapped up so she could look him square in the eyes. "But that ain't the whole of it. Learned somethin' brand-new few weeks back, we did. Somethin' that'll make your heart shrivel and scream."

Sato swallowed. It felt like a dried clump of dirt went down his throat. "What?"

Tears leaked from both of Mothball's eyes. "Kiddies," she said, her voice cracking. "The animals only be tests. She's done captured a bunch of kiddies and plans on usin' 'em soon as she's good and ready."

Darkness of the Way

Tick couldn't believe what he'd done. Even after some time to think about it, his mind still couldn't accept it. He sat on the forest floor, absently ripping apart leaves from a nearby bush, surrounded by darkness and cool air.

He'd winked something away. All by himself. After all the strange episodes leading up to that moment—the reappearance of the letter Kayla had burned, winking his group from the Thirteenth back to Master George's headquarters, the near-catastrophe in the Fourth Reality—he'd finally used Chi'karda on his own terms. He'd controlled it and used its power to wink—a thing the Realitants thought only a Barrier Wand could accomplish.

He'd done it all by himself.

"Told ya you were superhuman," Paul said from behind Tick, startling him.

He needed that jolt because he didn't have time to sit and contemplate. He looked down at his watch and clicked the little light—it'd been at least ten minutes since he sent the message to Sato. At least, he *hoped* he'd sent the message to Sato.

He pushed off the leafy bed of the ground and stood up, turning the flashlight back on as he did so. The others all stood closely together, examining him. Only Paul was smiling.

"What?" Tick asked. "I told you what I was going to do."

"Yeah, you did," Sofia said. "But . . . it was kind of spooky to watch. You're really weird, Tick."

He knew her well enough by now to recognize the compliment. But what did she mean about the spooky part? "Why? What happened? What did it look like when I did it?"

Sofia glanced at Master George—who nodded once, slowly, then at Paul—who let out a little burst of a laugh—then back at Tick. "Little streams of orange light spilled out of your eyes and ears and then swirled around the silver tube until it disappeared. You didn't see that? You were staring straight at the thing like you'd been possessed by forty demons."

Tick felt only a little bit of shock—not so much at the orange light but the fact that he hadn't noticed it. "No, I didn't see it. Maybe I was concentrating too much. But when Jane pulled the Chi'karda out of me when we were under Chu's palace, that's what it looked like. Orange light—kind of like a fog or

mist.”

“No, well, kind of, I guess,” Sofia responded. “It was more like ribbons of orange, something you’d see twirling off a cheerleader’s baton.”

“Interesting that it’s orange,” Master George said. “I wonder why we never see Chi’karda manifest itself that way when we use a Barrier Wand. Something tells me it’s related to the souliken discovery—though I’m far from understanding everything about that.”

Tick’s mind started processing what the Realitant leader had said, thinking it through and analyzing. He’d spent so much time the last few months studying science that such thinking had become second nature. But he forced himself to stop. They had to get moving—they were already behind schedule!

“Man, what are we doing?” he said through a groan. “We have to get going. Now. Come on.” He took a step, but then stopped, frowning. “Wait, any of you guys know which way is east?”

Master George pointed over his right shoulder, but Paul cut in. “Wait, man. You just did something crazy, like magical. Shouldn’t we talk about it, figure out what and how and all that, so next time you can do it again? Maybe even better?”

Tick was tired of saying it, but he repeated himself anyway. “It’ll have to wait—we need to go. Now. Just trust me.”

“Fine,” Paul said, turning toward the direction Master George had indicated. “But you promised to explain things as we walked. Start talking.”

“Okay,” Tick said. He shone the flashlight ahead of him, revealing an endless expanse of trees and brush, then walked forward, his every step crunching twigs and leaves. He moved past Master George, and the others followed right behind him. The strain from winking the tube away had worn off, and he felt the chill of the air like a sprinkle of fine mist. Being on the move again would feel good.

They’d gone about fifteen feet or so, and Tick figured now was as good a time to start talking as any. His friends deserved an explanation—even if Tick didn’t understand everything himself.

“So, the Haunce is like this big sack of people’s memories and personalities and thoughts,” Tick said. “It told me that every time we have a significant event in our lives, it leaves an electronic stamp on Reality, and those moments collect and become attached to us. That’s what a souliken is. Seems a lot easier to just call it a ghost.”

“I think I like *souliken* better,” Sofia said. “I’m not a big fan of ghosts.”

“Wuss,” Paul muttered. “Ow!”

Tick heard the punch on Paul’s arm that he’d fully expected.

“Doesn’t matter right now,” Tick said. “What matters is that the Haunce is a collection of millions and millions of soulikens, and it acts like a guardian

of the Realities. Sort of a gatekeeper or a watchman. Whatever. But we gotta trust it.”

“Yes, indeed,” Master George added, his voice already a little winded as they tramped through the forest. “The Haunce has the Realitants’ highest respect—there’s no doubt in this matter. What the Haunce says, we should do.”

“Okay,” Paul said. “So what is it we’re gonna do?”

Tick walked around a huge oak then settled back in on the course his instincts marked as east. “Well, ultimately the Haunce, me, and Jane are going to link and use our . . . power”—how he hated using that word!—“to rebind the barriers of the Realities that are falling apart.”

“Yeah, ultimately,” Paul said, a major hint of doubt in his tone. “But something tells me we’re not gonna like hearing what you keep avoiding—what we have to do to *get* to that point.”

Tick winced. Paul had hit at the heart of the matter. “Um, yeah, you’re probably right on that one.”

Tick felt Paul’s hand grab his arm as Paul forced him to stop and turn around.

“What!” Tick shouted way too loudly. But then he remembered what the next stage of the plan was and that being quiet didn’t quite play into it. Now that he had to tell them what the Haunce wanted, he was terrified of their reaction. They weren’t going to be very happy.

“Come on, dude,” Paul said, almost pleading. “Don’t make me give the corny speech about how we’re all part of a team. Tell us what’s going on.”

Tick shook Paul’s hand off his arm, but then nodded. Paul was right. He had to tell them. “Sorry. Obviously I’ve been avoiding that part.”

Paul folded his arms disapprovingly. “Yeah, obviously.”

“Come on, Tick,” Sofia said. “Just tell us real quick.”

Master George put his hands on his knees to catch his breath, not seeming to care one way or the other.

Tick thought furiously for a second. It hadn’t sounded so bad when the Haunce had told him about this part. But then again, they’d been tucked away safely in Tick’s home at the time. He decided to just get it over with. “Jane has a new creation—something called a Sleek.”

He expected everyone to repeat the word or start asking questions before he could continue. Instead, they all just stared at him, waiting.

“Once she had the fangen all figured out and perfected, she moved on to other creatures. And from the sound of it, always nasty and terrifying creatures. No big surprise there. But she always works with a purpose. The Sleeks are what she created to guard the Factory. And, um, we’re getting

really close to the place where they'll be hunting through the woods."

Tick saw fear flash across his friends' faces, and seeing that made him feel even more scared. "The Sleeks sound really, really awful. The whole purpose of their existence is to hunt down anything that's not supposed to be in these forests. They're tall and thin when seen straight on, but most of the time they're impossible to see clearly. They have ten times the strength of a fangen, and they have almost magic abilities using Chi'karda. The Haunce said they're wispy and fast, almost like living smoke mixed with wind. And once they catch sight of you, forget escaping. No way, according to the Haunce. But don't worry—there *is* some good news."

"I'm having quite a hard time seeing the *good* news in any of this," Master George said.

Tick looked at him. "Well, there is. Kind of. The Sleeks aren't allowed to kill what they hunt down. Mistress Jane wants to interrogate any intruders."

"Oh, no," Sofia said. "Don't tell me . . ."

"You've gotta be kidding," Paul added.

Tick was relieved they'd gotten it before he had to say it, but he did so anyway. "You guessed it. The Haunce wants *us* to find *them*. We have to let the Sleeks capture us."

The Speech

Sato sat alone, his heart like a dying filament inside a light bulb, about to burst and flame out at any second. What Mothball had said—about Jane planning to use human kids for her creations—horrified him like nothing ever had before. He knew a lot of bad things had happened in the history of the world, but this had to top it.

Killing was bad enough, but . . . what was the word Mothball had used? Melding. Jane was melding animals together . . .

He slammed the door on that thought. His mind had already slipped close to an edge overhanging a dark and awful abyss from which he didn't know if he could escape. He needed to keep it together. Hold onto the anger, sure. Let it fester and boil inside him until he had no choice but to go forward in a rage and do what he had to do to stop what the witch was doing. But he couldn't allow himself to sink back into that dark place which had once haunted him every day after seeing his parents murdered, burned alive by Jane herself.

He shook his head, slammed another door in his mind. Looking around, he saw that the people of the Fifth were gathering around him again, though a bit more timidly than before. They must have seen the anguish on his face, enough to scare them a little.

But that look of awe still clung to their expressions, their eyes filled with something he could only describe as hope. Which was good. Ever since reading the note from Tick—and *especially* since Mothball's revelation about the Factory—he'd been heading down a path toward a decision. He didn't even quite know if he consciously controlled this path, but every part of him walked along it.

He was going to do exactly what Tick asked. Somehow.

The tall people of the Fifth inched closer and closer, surrounding him on all sides. Sato craned his neck to look through the scant open spaces to where Lisa and the rest of Tick's family huddled far outside the crowd, still seeming to revel in their reunion and the good news that Tick was alive.

Mothball and Rutger had told them about the note—all of it. Now wasn't the time to hide anything from anybody. Sato knew that the Higginbottoms also had mixed feelings, and more reason than ever to worry over their son. Just another twist of the path Sato traveled. Just another reason to make things happen, no matter what.

“Excuse me, good sir,” a soft female voice said close to his ear. Closer than he felt comfortable allowing—he wasn’t ready yet!

He looked up, ready to snap at whoever had invaded his space. But it was an old woman, as tall as Mothball and just as gangly, leaning over him like a wind-broken tree. She had a gentle, pretty face, and Sato’s anger quickly slipped away.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “You all keep asking me the same thing, and I can’t answer it any differently. I’m not the guy you think I am.” He returned his chin to his fists, his eyes to the floor. How was he going to do this?

“We don’t rightly think that anymore,” the woman answered. “We’re not a bunch of dumb lugs, ya know. But there’s somethin’ right special about you, there is. And we want to ’ear from ya, that’s all. Not too much to be askin’, now is it?”

Sato took a long, deep breath. He had to do something, get the ball rolling. Sitting there with all of them gawking like kids at a zoo would drive him crazy if it went on for another minute.

“Fine,” he said, sighing as he forced himself to stand. The old woman smiled, her grin revealing that she only had about half her teeth, and those remaining were dark yellow. But still, she had a pretty face, despite its age and wear and tear. Somehow, she was keeping him polite and level-headed.

“Give us a speech,” she whispered to him, still leaning down considerably. “We could all use a bit of uppity-up, no matter the source. You’ve got the looks of one who can do that right nicely. You do, really.” She winked at him then stood straight, a good foot taller than Sato.

Sato looked away from her and around at the crowd. Many had taken a seat—especially the ones closest to him. Those farther back stood, arms folded, staring at him expectantly. There had to be at least three or four hundred people packed all around him. He slowly turned in a circle, taking it all in as he tried to think of something to say. The whole lot of them grew quiet.

You can do this, he thought to himself.

“I know why you guys are so fascinated by me,” he said, wondering if he could’ve possibly started his speech with anything more stupid. He doubted it. “I know I look a lot like the kid who was your ruler until those crazy Bug soldiers assassinated him.”

This caused an uproar, people shouting and yelling things all at once, many of them throwing their arms up and shaking their clenched fists in anger.

“Boo to the Bugaboos!”

“Death for the Bugs!”

“Drown the clowns!”

“No rest till the pests’ death!”

Sato didn't think it was possible, but he felt even more uncomfortable. He held his hands up, palms out, trying to shush them. Finally, they quieted. And he started talking; where the words came from, he had no idea.

"I'm not the same person as your leader who was killed. It's really hard to explain, but I'm from a different world—one that's a lot like yours but . . . different. Maybe it's not so hard to believe if you just look around at this weird place. But none of that matters. I know why you want me to be your Grand Minister. Everyone wants a leader, someone to look up to. But I don't know if I could ever really be that person."

A surge of complaints started to explode from the crowd, but Sato cut the noise off by swiping his hands back and forth. "Just listen to me! We all need something here, and I think we can help each other."

"What's that then?" the old woman asked, her right eyebrow cocked high. "What can we do for ya, lad?"

Sato was thinking on the fly, caught up in the moment. He was *feeling* it. "I know Mothball. I know her family. I know that the people of your world are fighters. You're warriors. Am I right?"

A hearty shout of cheers rang through the air, fists pumping toward the endless gray sky of nothingness above. A surge of heat and electric energy filled Sato's veins.

"The first thing we have to do is get out of this place. I have a very good friend who's in a lot of trouble, and if he dies, we all might die. I need your help to go after him, to help him, save him. We also need to stop something that a very evil person named Mistress Jane is doing—the sickest, most horrific thing I've ever heard of. We'll give you all the details soon enough—I think we have a little time yet. But if you do this—if you'll help me and . . . fight for me—I'll make a promise to each and every one of you."

Sato paused, scanning the crowd, in awe at how every eye was trained on him. Complete silence settled across the strange place. Even Mothball and Rutger stood rigid, mouths slightly agape, probably wondering who'd possessed Sato's body.

"If you'll go with me," Sato said, the rush of adrenaline inside sounding like an ocean's roar in his ears, "and fight to help my friend and stop Jane, then I promise to go back to your world with you and lead the war against the Bugs. The endgame of all endgames. We won't stop until we wipe them from existence. All of them! We will fight. And I swear, we will win!"

The roar that filled that impossible place made Sato want to take a step backward and cover his ears. He did neither.

He stood tall and yelled right along with the warriors from the Fifth Reality.

Shivers

The sounds of the night-darkened forest were starting to get to Tick as he and his friends slowly made their way eastward.

Besides the normal buzz of insects going about their business, a wind had picked up, something that seemed impossible based on how many trees crowded their pathway. Limbs and branches swayed and scratched against each other; leaves rustled; small animals jumped and ran through the bushy ground cover. Eerie mating calls moaned through the air, and every once in a while a cat-like thing screamed far in the distance. It all added up to give Tick a major case of the shivers.

He'd tried his best to show a brave face when telling the others about how the Haunce wanted them to be caught by the Sleeks. It had seemed a practical matter—the best way they could get into the Factory and possibly face-to-face with Jane. And the others had reluctantly agreed to the plan after wasting five minutes arguing about it. Master George had proven to be the voice of reason that cut through the obvious hesitancy to do something so scary.

But now, trampling their way through the spooky woods, his flashlight beam stabbing the darkness ahead, getting closer and closer to something that was created by and for evil, Tick felt a different kind of fear than he'd ever experienced before. A thick terror sprinkled his skin with chills and surged in his throat, like a balloon had been shoved down there. With every crick and crash of broken twigs and crushed leaves as his companions and he walked forward, he had to fight the urge to look around, searching for an enemy he knew was coming for him.

Instead he forced himself to look ahead, to keep walking and dodging his way through the tightly packed trees until the attack came. He held onto the fact that they wouldn't have to fight or run this time—they just had to give up and be taken prisoner.

"Tick," came a soft whisper from behind him. Sofia. "Have you seen or heard anything weird yet?"

Tick turned to look at her quickly before facing forward again, not missing a step. "We don't really need to whisper," he called out, louder than he needed to. "It kind of defeats the purpose of what we're doing. And no, I haven't really noticed anything too weird yet."

"Nothing too weird?" Paul repeated. "Some demon cat is being eaten by

Satan out in the woods, screaming its fool head off. I'd call that weird."

Tick had to suppress a snicker, a fleeting break from the fear that had been suffocating him. "It's probably just a deer or something that broke a leg."

"A deer? Never heard anything sound like that on *Bambi*."

Master George spoke up. "My guess would be that we're getting quite close to the area where these guardian creatures roam and hunt. Based on what I've learned from Mothball's, er, reports."

George cleared his throat in an embarrassed sort of way, and Tick's suspicions shot up enough to make him stop walking. He turned to face him. "You just said 'er' and cleared your throat. What aren't you telling us?"

Paul and Sofia stopped as well and faced Master George. Tick held the flashlight so that the beam pointed at the ground, but the glow was enough to show a tight look of worry on the man's face.

"Really should keep walking, don't you think?" he said, trying to smile but somehow making himself look even more uneasy. He feebly pointed toward the direction they were heading.

"What's wrong?" Sofia asked.

"Yeah," Paul added. "You look constipated all of a sudden."

Master George folded his hands together—they'd been twitching slightly at his sides. "Our Realitant spies have recently been providing Mothball with information on the Factory."

"And you didn't say anything?" Sofia shouted. The echo of her voice seemed to hang in the tops of the trees for a full five seconds.

"Calm yourself, goodness gracious me," Master George snapped back, Sofia's outburst having brought back some dignity to his face. "We need to go there no matter what I know, and I was merely waiting for the right time to speak on it. But, if you must hear it now, what I have to say will only make our reasons for going forward even stronger."

"*What?*" Tick asked, not bothering to hide the impatience that came out in his voice.

Master George kicked a bush near his feet. "Oh, how it angers me. This, more than anything she's ever done. Jane is stealing children from towns and cities across the Thirteenth Reality and keeping them in the Factory. We suspect she is planning to use them somehow to create her abominations at the Factory. She's currently using her powers of Chi'karda to deconstruct various animals on a quantum level and put them back together again to serve whatever purposes she's dreamed up with her evil mind. *Horror* is the only word I can think of to describe such a thing."

The Haunce had told Tick about this when discussing the overall plan, but the reality of it hadn't hit until he heard his boss explain it in such stark terms. An emptiness expanded inside Tick, a void that should've been filled with a

long list of terrible emotions but instead felt numb.

“She can’t be that sick,” Paul said. “She can’t be.”

“I’m afraid our sources are very reliable,” Master George said. “I believe what happened to Jane in the Fourth Reality”—he shot a nervous and quick glance at Tick—“has driven her past a point from which I can’t imagine anyone could ever return. Her life has been consumed by hatred and evil, encompassed by a delusion that she can still find her utopian reality and bring an endless peace to the universe. Bah! She’ll have every last one of us dead. The woman’s insane, I tell you. Insane!”

Tick had a disturbing thought pop into his head. “Well, I guess if we can’t stop the Realities from going kaboom, at least Jane won’t be able to steal any more kids.”

“Don’t let your mind wander down that path,” Master George said, stepping closer to Tick. He put a hand on his shoulder. “Instead, let’s focus on accomplishing what the Haunce has sent you to do. Once done, we’ll stop Jane’s madness *and* free the children.”

Tick looked at Sofia, then Paul. Both of them had stern faces, made all the harsher by the sharp shadows from the flashlight. “What do you guys think?”

“What do you mean?” Sofia asked, an edge to her voice. “What do you *think* we think?”

“No,” Tick said. “I just . . . does this change anything? We knew we had to get in there and convince Jane to help us. After we do what the Haunce wants . . .” He didn’t know how to finish. Despite what George had said, every potential pathway that flickered inside Tick’s mind seemed to head for disaster.

“Dude,” Paul said in his gimme-a-break tone. “This only makes it clearer. Crazy Jane can do all the hokey-pokey stuff she wants, but if she’s messing with little kids now . . . we gotta get in there and stop it. Simple as that.”

Sofia was breathing as if this latest news had pumped up her adrenaline. “And Sato will come—just like you asked him to in your note. We can do it, Tick. You’ll save the universe with your fancy powers, then we’ll get the kids out, then we’ll burn the whole place to the ground. Let’s go!”

She didn’t wait for a response but marched off into the dark woods, toward the east. Paul stepped in line right behind her.

Tick looked at Master George. “Guess I’m not in the lead anymore.”

“Well, I think they could use your flashlight. Let’s go, Atticus. Lots to do.”

Tick nodded and started walking, shining his light up ahead so his friends could see. As they made their way forward for the next few minutes, the shadows leaping with every movement and the eerie sounds of the forest haunting the cool air, Tick realized his earlier choking fear had disappeared. It had transformed into impatience, an eagerness, even.

Sofia stopped, holding her hand up to signal them to do the same. Paul almost bumped into her, letting a branch loose as he caught his balance. It hit Tick square in the nose, but Sofia cut off his cry of complaint before it got started.

“Quiet!” she snapped in a harsh whisper, finally lowering her hand as she looked back at them. “Something just . . . whisked across our path. Up ahead.”

Ice began to fill Tick’s chest again. He stepped to the side so he could shine the light forward without his friends being in the way. He saw gloomy, towering trees and thick bushes and ivy, all the greenness muted and pale. The shadows stretched and retracted as he swept the area, but nothing out of the ordinary came into view.

“Hear the silence?” Master George whispered from behind Tick, startling him. His voice seemed louder than it should have, and Tick realized why. All those creepy sounds they’d been hearing earlier had cut off. Completely. The sudden quiet reminded Tick of being outside after a heavy snowstorm back home—all sound sucked in by the cold, white stuff.

Tick caught a glimpse of something flashing toward him from the right—a wispy trail of fog that he barely saw. He imagined he could see the faint image of a head and a long body, an outreaching hand, when sharp tingles pricked the skin along his forearm, making him suck in a breath.

There was a popping sound, and then the flashlight went out.

Smoky Embrace

The needle pricks vanished. Tick instinctively held up the flashlight to take a look, but the darkness was too complete; black engulfed everything. He flicked the switch back and forth. Nothing. Then he shook it.

Shards of loose glass tinkled together and fell to the ground. The light bulb hadn't burned out; something had smashed it, making it useless.

"Tick, dude, what happened?" Paul whispered, though it sounded like anyone within a hundred miles could've heard him.

"I don't know." Tick looked around but couldn't see a thing. He remembered the ghostly image of what he'd seen from the corner of his eye. Those long, smoky fingers of fog reaching out . . .

Leaves crunched a couple of times where Sofia had been standing.

"Sofia!" Tick shouted, a boom in the silence that echoed off the tree branches.

"I'm fine," she whispered back harshly. "Sheesh. I'm just feeling my way toward you." Another couple of steps, more twigs breaking. "I heard glass break—how did you smash your flashlight?"

Tick could see the shadow of her figure right in front of him now. He reached out and found her shoulder. "Okay. So, I was standing there, and then I saw something to the right. Something like a trail of fog. But it was kind of shaped like a . . . like a stretched-out human with really long arms and fingers. Then it felt like a hundred needles stabbed my arm, and something popped, and the light went out. It's broken."

"Wait a second," Paul said as he also took a couple of tentative steps toward Tick and Sofia. "What did you see again?"

"I guess it must've been a Sleek. Kind of smoky and long, looked human-like. What do you think, Master George?"

Silence answered him. Chills swept over Tick. He looked in the direction where he'd last heard George's voice. His eyes were already adjusting to the darkness, but he saw nothing except the tall, dark shadows of trees and more trees.

"Master George!" he called out, wincing at the loudness of his voice. Again, no answer.

"Those creepy things took him," Paul said in a fierce whisper. "And we're next!"

Sofia shushed him then spoke in a quiet voice. “That’s we *want* to happen, remember? We just have to—”

A twig snapped to Tick’s right, silencing Sofia. A few leaves rustled in the same spot. The swell of chilling panic crept up Tick’s chest as he looked in that direction, straining his eyes to see.

Something stood there, a dozen or so feet away, its shadow splitting the space between two huge, towering trees. Thin but man-shaped, the thing had to be as tall as a basketball standard. The edges of the shadowy figure wavered like a reflection on water, ripples of darkness running up and down. The slightest glint of silver shone where its eyes would be, and something about the light—maybe the hue, maybe the angle—made the creature look very angry.

“Who—” Tick’s voice caught in his throat. “Who are you? Are you a Sleek?”

The thing’s silver eyes flared brighter for just a moment, but it was long enough to reveal more of its features. Streamers of dark smoke were packed tight and swirling through and across each other, compressed together to form the tall body that stood before them. Tick thought they looked almost like worms being held back by some invisible force until they could be unleashed to seek out food.

But the face was different. It didn’t seem to be made of the smoky substance. It looked . . . human. Real skin, though misshapen and scarred. Every cell in Tick’s brain screamed at him to run.

The light of the creature’s eyes dulled again, throwing the tall figure back into shadow.

“Ask it again,” Paul whispered.

Tick didn’t know if he could bring himself to speak. Sofia saved him.

“What are you waiting for?” she yelled. “We know you’re a Sleek, so get it over with! Quit standing there all spooky, you haunted-house wannabe!”

Tick looked over at her, wishing he could see her face. Sometimes her bravery completely stunned him.

A noise from the creature pulled Tick’s attention away from Sofia. A whispery, raspy sound. Harsh and guttural. It continued on for several seconds, but if the thing was trying to communicate, Tick didn’t understand a word of it. The metallic glow of those silver eyes seemed pinpointed on him.

The Sleek quit talking, leaving them all in an eerie stillness. The sounds of the forest remained silent, as if every living creature had long since run away. Then everything changed in an instant.

A wind swept through the woods, sudden and violent. A torrent ripped at the trees, sending leaves shooting through the air like flaky bullets. Tick threw his arms up to protect his face, catching a glimpse of the Sleek’s silver eyes

flaring again before they disappeared altogether. Darkness took over, leaving the world black and consumed by the rushing sound of wind.

Sofia screamed, the screech of it barely begun before it whisked away into the distance, fading and gone. Something had taken her. Paul yelled several terror-filled words, but Tick only caught his name. Then a scream even higher-pitched than Sofia's rang out, followed by a thump and the crack of a broken tree branch. The sounds of a body being dragged quickly across the forest floor were soon swallowed by the overpowering wind.

Sofia—gone. Paul—gone. Master George—gone.

Leaves and small twigs pelted Tick's body. The howling wind ripped at his clothes and hair. He risked a peek, lowering the arm he held tightly across his upper face, but he saw only darkness in front of him. Flecks of debris hit him in the eyes, making him squeeze them shut. He rubbed at them with his other hand, then opened up again.

He let out a cry of terror when he saw two silver lights right in front of him, looking out of a hideous, mangled face. With a swirl of black smoke, the Sleek grabbed him by both ankles and squeezed them like a metal rope cinched tight enough to break skin and crush bones. His feet flew out from under him as the Sleek pulled. Tick's back crashed to the ground. Then his whole body jerked forward, dragged across the rough forest floor.

~



Master George knew what was happening the instant the tingle first sprinkled across the back of his neck. Someone at headquarters had finally locked onto his nanolocator and was winking him back to the Bermuda Triangle station. Sally, probably, having likely broken a hundred things in the process before finally figuring out how to do it.

And Master George knew what he had to do.

As soon as the dark forest vanished, replaced by the inner workings of his cramped Control Room with its bright monitors and blinking instruments and metal piping, he threw his hands up and started shouting.

“Don’t wink the others! Don’t wink the others! Don’t wink back Atticus or

the rest of them!”

Big Sally—dressed in his usual plaid shirt and overalls—stood at the main computer, a Barrier Wand clasped in his huge hands. The look on his perplexed face was almost comical, and somewhat pitiful as well.

“I’s waitin’ on that brain a’yorn to figger it out anyhoo,” the burly man said. “’Bout chicken-fried my noggin gettin’ you here as it was!”

Master George finally felt a bit of calm. “Excellent work, Sally, excellent work! We mustn’t wink the others back quite yet—they have a very important task to accomplish first. But we need to get to work straight away.” He walked past Sally and headed toward the door.

“What’s on that mind a’yorn?” Sally asked as he set the Wand down and followed George.

Master George reached the door and entered the hallway. “We’ve got things to collect before we move out. As many weapons as possible . . . and nanolocator patches—we’ll probably need hundreds of patches. We must hurry!”

“Where you reckon we’re goin’ then?”

“We’re going to meet up with Sato at a place called the Factory. We have to rescue Sofia, Paul, and Atticus.” Master George turned to face Sally. “Not to mention a lot of children.”

The Surge

The wind in the forest stopped suddenly, cut off like a giant door slamming shut. Tick could hear the scrape of his body against the leaves and scattered debris underneath him. Things poked and scratched. His shirt ran up to his shoulders, leaving his skin exposed and vulnerable. Pain lit through him. The Sleek's grip didn't loosen; if anything, it tightened as it pulled Tick along.

He tried to look at it, but saw nothing except the occasional glimmer of silver light reflecting off tree trunks. He tried to pull himself up, crunching his abs as he reached for his legs, his ankles, but the speed and roughness of the way was too much. He fell back, his head slamming against a fallen log just as he popped over it.

Scratches and scrapes, bumps and bruises. Tick felt the warmth of blood trickling in his hair, wetting his entire back. The sounds of crunching leaves and snapping twigs as his body was dragged across them filled his ears. Darkness surrounded him.

His instincts had him reaching for Chi'karda before his mind formed the thought. Wrapping his arms tightly around his body, he rolled to his side, trying to give his back a break and let his shoulder take some of the abuse. Then he forced himself to close his eyes, searching and probing for the heat of the power within him.

There. A spark.

He reached for it with mental hands and grabbed it, squeezed it, embraced it. Quicker than ever before, the Chi'karda burst through him, filling his body with a raging burn. It pulsed and throbbed. Tick felt like it was about to explode out of him, devouring first his flesh and then the forest in flames. Tick heard the woods around him shake, heard the same odd bee-buzz sound from months ago when he'd unwittingly unleashed his power in fear, wreaking havoc with molecular structures, melding trees and other things together. The same had happened in Chu's mountain building.

Tick knew he was losing control.

He screamed and opened his eyes.

The first thing he noticed was that he'd stopped moving. An orange cloud of sparkling mist surrounded him, illuminating the forest. The Sleek had released his ankles and stood several feet away, its silver eyes wide and bright, maybe out of shock. Tick could see the thing's body clearly now—the

seething tendrils of black smoke that coiled and wrapped together to form the elongated body, the hacked up face, the wispy trails of its fingers.

Tick was trembling, his hands balled into fists. He didn't feel pain anymore, only the surge of Chi'karda threatening to scorch him and everything around him. His jaw clenched as if it had locked closed forever. He wanted to kill the Sleek. Chase down the others and kill them. Rescue his friends. Run away. He almost boiled with the desire.

With a scream of rage, he jumped up and pounced on the Sleek, grabbing it by the neck just as it tried to break apart and whisk away. Tick slammed the creature against the closest tree, knowing he shouldn't be able to do this, knowing that he was somehow using the Chi'karda to make the Sleek maintain its structure and solidity. The thin neck of coiled smoke felt like shifting sands under his fingers, churning and slipping but staying in one place.

Tick squeezed, feeling the neck crackle, as if it *were* sand and hardening to glass. That creepy, cackling whisper of a voice escaped the Sleek's mouth, saying things Tick couldn't understand. But it seemed desperate and terrified, the sound of it chilling.

The buzzing sound intensified above them. Chi'karda blazed inside Tick. The orange mist swirled around him like a tornado of fire. A wind picked up, seeming to blow from all directions at once, though it did nothing to the cloud of Chi'karda. Tick felt as if the entire world were about to melt into a pool of lava.

He squeezed the Sleek's neck even harder.

Something tried to click inside Tick's brain. Tried to tell him that he'd forgotten the whole point of what he'd come here for. That in the pain and terror of being dragged through the forest, he'd let his anger take over. That he'd lost it, completely lost it.

And yet . . . he was controlling the Chi'karda more than ever before. He was controlling it! Kind of . . .

"Tick!"

A voice. A girl. From somewhere to his right. He barely heard it. He didn't want to look, didn't have time to look. The Sleek was almost dead, and then he could go after the others. Maybe he could experiment with Chi'karda, see what he could do with it. Strike out with it somehow? Maybe shoot beams of fiery lasers? Yeah, that'd be awesome.

"Tick!"

The voice was too loud to ignore this time, despite the ripping wind and blazing heat inside him, the buzz of things disintegrating and reforming above him. He knew he was doing things to the trees again, but he didn't care.

"Tick!"

He snapped out of his delirious daze and looked over to see Sofia standing close to him. The smoky tendrils of a Sleek's fingers were wrapped around *her* neck. Paul was next to her, also in the custody of a Sleek. The orange glow of Tick's power made the Sleek's silvery eyes look angry and red.

"Tick!" Sofia shouted. "You can't do this! Remember why we're here in the first place!"

Tick didn't quite feel like himself. He'd let the burning power of the Chi'karda consume him and take over his bad parts—the anger, the temper, the thirst for revenge—and part of him had liked it. "You're just saying that!" he yelled over the noise of the wind and the buzzing. "You don't want them to kill you, so you're trying to stop me! Well, *I* can stop *them*! Look at this!"

He let go of the Sleek and took a step back, gesturing with his arms like a magician. The orange cloud swirled around him and through his fingertips, around his arms and legs, curling, almost caressing. Fire raged inside him. He turned, pointing at the wooden formations surrounding them. Dozens of trees had been blown apart on a quantum level and put back together again like a series of haunting sculptures crafted by a lunatic.

Tick couldn't believe it. He was close to understanding how it all worked, close to *really* being able to control it. So close. And he had no idea how—it was just . . . instinct.

He turned back to face Sofia and Paul, their necks still ensnared by the cuffs of smoky fingers. "I know I'm a little bit weird right now," he said. "But check it out. If I can really do this—"

"Dude, you gotta save it," Paul said. "You're freakin' me out here, man. You've got the crazy eyes."

Sofia tried to step forward, but the Sleek yanked her back. She let out a choking cough then said, "Tick, he's right. Something's wrong—on a lot of levels. Just let it go and stick to the plan. Let the Sleeks take us to Mistress Jane. Okay, Tick?"

Tick dropped his eyes and held out his hands to look at the glowing orange mist of Chi'karda swirling around his arms and through his fingers. Hunger burned within him almost as strong as the power itself, a fierce desire to wreak havoc on Jane and the rest of his enemies. But somewhere in the nooks and crannies of his mind, he realized that something wasn't right about the way he felt. Something on the cusp of evil.

"Okay," he said, barely a whisper. Then louder, "Okay."

He closed his eyes and imagined the cloud of sparkles retracting, absorbing back into his body. He pulled it all inside, then let it go, releasing it to whatever place it lay dormant in the quantum realm, where it would wait for him to snatch it up again. When a refreshing coolness rushed through his body and filled the void left by the Chi'karda, he had the thought that he'd

just extinguished himself.

He opened his eyes and noticed the stark silence and darkness of the forest. Sofia, Paul, and their spooky captors remained still, staring at him. He could just see the two sets of wide eyes and four pinpoints of silver.

“All right,” he said, amazed at how incredibly thirsty he was. “We’ll go with the Sleeks, nice and easy. But this time we’re walking. Don’t make me mad again.”

Frazier's Good News

Mistress Jane wasn't happy. Everything had gone horribly wrong today, and the only thing that could make her feel better was for someone to pay the consequences. Anyone. Whether or not they were actually at fault for the debacle was a minor point she didn't care too much about at the moment.

She sat at the window of her room in the Lemon Fortress, looking out at a land covered in night, no moon to break up the darkness. The earthquakes and shattering lightning storms had finally stopped, though the damage they'd caused would take months to repair and rebuild. It was a miracle the castle still stood at all. She wondered if it was foolish to be up here. Who knew what had happened to the foundations and inner structure—the whole thing could collapse at any moment.

Her foul, foul mood darkened to black.

What had gone wrong? After months of preparation, the tireless, tedious work required to retrieve and alter the dark matter into the form she needed, the time to find and secure every single one of her Alterants in the major Reality branches—after all the planning and sacrificing and risking . . .

It had all gone wrong in an instant. The Blade of Shattered Hope had failed her.

That was the worst part. The second worst part was the fact that she didn't really know *why* it had failed. The Higginbottom boy had done something—she knew that much. But her instincts told her that his meddling alone had not caused the catastrophic change in direction. His trickle of Chi'karda had not ruptured the connection of the Blade, causing its apocalyptic damage to explode from its course and spread throughout each and every Reality and the barriers between.

No, it wasn't just him. She'd . . . missed something, done something wrong.

There—she'd admitted it to herself. But it didn't make her feel any better. It made her feel worse. Angrier.

Maybe, just maybe, the Blade could've overcome this fault if the addition of Higginbottom's usage of power had not occurred. Yes, maybe.

And that was enough for her. She had a focal point on which to exact her vengeance. Not that she really needed anything to make her hate the boy any

more than she already did, but still, it helped.

The knock she'd been expecting finally rapped at her door.

"Come in!" she yelled.

She heard a thump then a small scrape. The big door was stuck because of the shifting of stones from the earthquake. With barely a thought, Jane dissolved the wood particles into the air to allow Frazier to enter the room. Once he was inside, she put the door back together again.

"I have news," her most faithful servant said.

A fire roared in the brick hearth, a luxury Jane loved even as the coolness of winter faded into spring. She pulled a few sparks out with her power and lit the huge candles scattered throughout the room. The glow showed an eagerness on Frazier's face that lifted her hopes.

"Have a seat and tell me what you've learned." She pointed to the chair across from her. "I don't have to tell you how . . . disappointing further bad news would be at the moment." She let the expression on her mask turn to anger for a second before bringing it back to smooth calmness.

Frazier nodded, the barest hint of a smile flashing across his face as he walked over and sat down on the edge of the chair next to her. "I think you'll like what I have to say."

"Then get on with it."

"Yes, Mistress." He leaned forward, his elbows on knees, hands clasped. "Over the last few hours, we've sent people to all the Realities to gather as much data as possible. We, um, had to send out quite a few, because they kept dying in all the chaos. More than half, actually."

Jane's first instinct was to snap at Frazier for wasting time about such an unimportant detail, but she kept her cool. "Yes, a worthy sacrifice, I'm sure. Whatever it took to learn what we needed."

"Yes. Yes, of course. Anyway, the devastation we saw here was universal. Massive earthquakes, catastrophic storms, tornadoes, you name it—it all happened in each and every Reality. Lasted for a good hour or two. Killed, um, millions of people." His eyes flickered to the floor at this last part.

"Feel no shame, Frazier. Remember, we knew there would be collateral damage in our mission for Utopia. For Chi'karda's sake, if the Blade had worked today like it was supposed to, six *billion* people would've died! What's a few million? Keep your focus! We don't have time to mourn the losses along the way." In truth, she felt a constant, choking swell of guilt, but had learned to accept it and live with it.

Frazier composed himself and continued his report. "We know the destruction was widespread throughout all the Realities. But it seems to have stopped, everywhere. Maybe we've avoided the complete meltdown you

feared.”

“‘Meltdown’?” Jane repeated. “That seems too sweet a word. What worried me was that we’d set off a chain reaction that would wipe us all from existence. I still sense something wrong in the air, in the Chi’karda, like a bubble that’s about to burst. Don’t be too confident that we’re in the clear just yet.”

“At least it’s calmed down for now. That first hour or so, I was ready to accept my fate and make my peace. I don’t know—I feel like we’re good now. I think we’re going to be okay.”

Jane scoffed at him. “You trust your instincts over mine? Not a smart way to go about things, Frazier. What you’re feeling is just the natural relief after a close call. We are not safe yet—trust me on that. If you’re going to be my right-hand man, I need you to stay pragmatic and sharp and not fall for whimsical feelings of comfort and safety.” How she hated being mean to this man, but she could never restrain herself.

“I understand, Mistress. And I promise we haven’t let down our guard in the least. Our people are winking back and forth, constantly giving updates. If anything bad starts up again, we’ll know right away.”

“Good. What else? I have a feeling that smile you couldn’t keep off your face walking in here wasn’t for this alone.”

Frazier grinned enough to show his teeth. “Observant as usual. You always know—”

“Get on with it.”

“Yeah, sorry. Um, well, I think I have some news for you that none of us could’ve expected this soon.”

Frazier paused, staring into the eyeholes of her mask like a lover. His confidence and courage shocked Jane. Surprisingly, it didn’t anger her, only made her more eager to hear what he had to say.

“Word has come from the Sleeks guarding the forest at the Factory. They’ve captured three Realitants. They’re not quite to the Factory yet, but one of the Sleeks rushed to get the news to us. The prisoners will be locked up and ready for you to interrogate by the time you arrive, I’m sure.”

Jane felt a pleasant tingle wash across the severely damaged skin of her entire body—something she hadn’t experienced since the Dark Infinity incident. She didn’t know she still had the capability for such things—for pleasure.

Almost forgetting herself, she leaned forward like an eager schoolgirl wanting to hear about a boy she liked. “I know what you’re going to say next. I know who they’ve captured, or you wouldn’t be so excited. Tell me I’m right, Frazier.”

He laughed, surprising her again. “You are. Higgin-bottom and two of his

friends. We got 'em.”

Jane leaned back in her chair, then realized her mask had transformed into a giant smile. She quickly erased it, but that’s how she felt. When Atticus had disappeared back at the Blade tree, she’d had a thousand troubling thoughts flash through her mind. The worst one was that the Haunce had gotten involved, and if that had been the case, very bad things could have happened. But there had to be another explanation if the Sleeks had captured the boy again so soon, so easily.

So . . . easily.

Her brief elation vanished. “Frazier, why in the world would those people come to the Factory? Why come to the Thirteenth Reality at all? Something’s wrong here.”

Frazier’s face so quickly melted into distraught panic that Jane felt sorry for him. “I . . . don’t know, Mistress. I . . . but . . . if we have them, does it matter? We caught them. Whatever they were trying to do, we stopped them!”

Jane stood up. “It’s too easy, too simple. Tell the Sleeks to guard them with every creature they can spare. I want every weapon on the grounds gathered—send more if necessary. Search the entire area. Something is wrong!” She pulled up the hem of her robe and started marching toward the door.

“What . . . where are you going?” Frazier called from behind her.

She swiveled sharply to look at him, her mask full of rage. “No more chances, no more mistakes. The boy must die—he’s too dangerous! We’ll have to be careful so as not to accidentally ignite the powers inside him. But I’m going to kill him till he’s dead, dead, dead!”

She felt a trickle of insanity—and relished it.

An Interesting Gate

Tick's display of power must've made an impression on the tall, wispy Sleeks. They didn't make a sound as they moved through the forest, and they had even let go of their prisoners' necks, letting them walk freely as long as they stayed on course. And they came nowhere near Tick himself.

Dawn had finally hit the world, making everything in the forest look dull purple. While the extra light made the journey easier, it also reminded Tick of how long it had been since he'd last slept, and exhaustion weighed on him like soggy clothing. He knew they must be close to the Factory. He couldn't help but hope that once they got there, they'd throw them in a prison cell where he could get at least a little rest before Jane showed up and they had to do their magic tricks to save the universe.

He'd tried twice to speak to Paul or Sofia, but neither of them would respond, flickering their eyes at the Sleeks as if scared of the consequences. Tick guessed he could understand their hesitation, but he felt no fear of the creatures anymore. It was odd—their creepy look alone should've made him shudder with chills every time he looked at them, but his episode earlier with the surge of Chi'karda had pumped him full of confidence.

Those things weren't going to mess with him again. Right that second, he thought nothing in the world would ever mess with him again. His rational side tried to tell him that he was being stupid, but he pushed it away, wanting to enjoy this feeling of invincibility for a little while longer.

The air around them brightened suddenly, a combination of the trees thinning out and the sun rising higher by the second. Tick looked up and saw the sky for the first time in awhile. A flat layer of bumpy clouds panned across most of it, the eastern edge outlined in fiery orange. Something smelled really awful, growing more pungent as he thought about it. He was pretty sure he'd never been around a rotting animal before, but for some reason that's exactly what the odor made him think of.

He shot a glance at Paul, wrinkling up his nose.

Paul returned the sour face, then waved his hand back and forth in front of his nose.

Tick returned his attention to the path ahead of him. The Sleeks refused to walk in front of him, instead pointing every once in a while with a rasping, hoarse croak. Tick just loved it—the things were scared of him. Scared of

him!

Shut up, Tick, he told himself. Something's wrong with you.

He knew he didn't have time to worry about it, but he felt like he'd ingested rotten milk into his system. There was a taint of . . . evil coursing through his veins. Maybe using Chi'karda—and letting it consume him and take over his emotions, his anger—had a price to it.

He shook it off. Things were changing up ahead.

They stepped past a last bunch of trees into a wide open, muddy space, void of any vegetation. A hundred yards or so away stood a tall, jagged wall of lumber, the thick pieces thrown together as if by accident. The wall ran in both directions for at least a mile before curving out of sight. The only break was a large gate made of twenty or thirty black iron bars, the upper tips ending in spikes. Heads of fangen and other monsters had been impaled on each and every spike.

Tick shuddered. Weren't fangen and other creatures *created* here? Then it hit him. Just as you might see several auto models displayed in front of a car factory, so were the products being shown off here.

Tick continued walking without missing a beat, each footstep squishing in the mud, his eyes fixed on the heads on the gate. He wanted to remember them for later, for when he would need something to give him incentive to stop what was going on here. Everything about the Factory disgusted him, and for just a second, he felt a flare of Chi'karda ignite inside him. He put it down and kept moving.

He didn't break his gaze until they'd crossed about half the open area. He wanted to see what the Sleeks looked like in full light. They still walked right behind Paul and Sofia, their tightly wound coils of smoke looking blacker than ever. Their bodies were impossibly long and drawn out, little puffs of dark fog bleeding off them with every step. They wore no clothes and looked like nothing but a ragtag doll made of old, dirty rope. Their silver eyes were the only things that broke the monotony; they flared just as brightly during the daytime as they had in the night.

Tick caught Sofia's eyes, then Paul's, silently telling them that this was it, things were about to get interesting. As he swiveled his head back toward the approaching gate, he wondered about the Sleeks. What were they? Had they been created here in the Factory? Mistress Jane had used her powers to set this all up. Was it something Tick could learn if he wanted to? Surprisingly, the question intrigued him and, for the briefest of moments, excited him. The thought chilled his heart.

Yeah, something's wrong with me, he thought. He caught a powerful whiff of something totally foul, making words like *rotten* and *decay* pop into his head. Pinching his nose shut with two fingers, he took the last few steps until

they were standing just in front of the looming iron gate. Oddly, the only thing he could see through the bars of the gate was a grove of trees.

“All right, Sleeks,” he said. “What now?”

One of the smoky creatures walked ahead of him, seeming to float along, then clasped its smoky fingers into fists and leaned forward as it screeched out a breathy series of harsh words, completely indecipherable.

“That guy needs a cough drop somethin’ awful,” Paul said, the first time he’d spoken in a good hour or two.

“How do we know Jane will come here to see us?” Sofia asked. “For all we know, she could just tell them to kill us and be done with it.”

Tick winced at the thought, but he had confidence that wouldn’t happen. “She’ll want to know what I did to ruin her black tree thing. That, or she’ll want to rub it in our faces before she slaughters us herself. She’ll come, don’t worry.”

The Sleek moved to stand with its companion behind Tick and his friends. Tick turned his attention to the gate, feeling each breath draw in and out as he anxiously waited for the thing to swing open.

A low rumbling noise seemed to come from everywhere at once, like the sound of cranked-up machinery. The ground vibrated, then intensified to an outright shake, making Tick’s feet almost bounce in the mud. He warily took a step backward, then a few more. Paul and Sofia did the same until they were about twenty feet from the iron bars. The gate remained closed. The sound of thrumming machinery grew louder.

“Seems like a lot of work just to open a stupid gate!” Paul yelled.

Tick nodded but didn’t respond, his gaze riveted ahead, the anticipation making him feel waterlogged in his chest. His concentration was so focused on the gate itself that he didn’t notice what was happening at their feet until Sofia shouted for them to look down.

A huge section of the muddy ground was shifting, the front edge right in front of the gate lowering, tilting on a fulcrum in the middle of the section. Tick and his companions rose as the other end sank like a giant seesaw. The angle steepened at an alarming rate, approaching forty-five degrees before anyone could react.

“Get—” Tick began, but couldn’t finish, his feet slipping out from under him.

He fell on his butt and scrambled to hold onto something, but his fingers found only wet, slippery mud. He looked up, frantic, and saw a big chunk of black smoke heading for his face. It hit him like a hard shot from a firm pillow, and then he was sliding toward the gaping hole that had opened at the foot of the gate.

He slipped through the slimy sludge, Paul and Sofia right next to him.

Down, down, until they reached the edge and plummeted into dark, empty air.

Strips of Fire

The fall lasted only ten feet or so, but it was the longest and worst second of Tick's life—a terrifying second when he felt like he'd either drop forever or be smashed to a bloody pulp far below. He barely had time to curl into a protective ball before he slammed into a dirt-packed floor. He felt the wind knock out of him and heard the grunts of his two friends. He only peripherally noticed the section of ground above them slam shut with a metallic clang, leaving them in complete darkness.

Groaning, he rolled over onto his side, knowing he'd been lucky to avoid a broken bone or worse—even though at the moment, his whole body hurt.

“You guys okay?” he called out.

“Fine,” Sofia answered.

A few seconds passed, then Paul said, “I think I broke my spleen.”

“What?” Tick forgot his aches and pains and sat up.

“I'm kidding, dude. I'm fine. I don't even know what a spleen is. Does *anybody* know what a spleen is?”

Tick spoke before he knew what he was saying. “It's a highly vascular lymphoid organ between your stomach and diaphragm.” He paused. “Sorry. Been reading a lot of science books lately.”

“I already knew that,” Sofia said.

“Yeah,” Paul replied. “I'm sure you did, Miss Italy. What do you think happened to Master George?”

Tick got to his feet, the jarring pain of the fall starting to fade for the most part. “He's probably being held somewhere else. This can't be the place they want to keep us. Why would they have a prison cell right below the gate?” He held his hands out, trying to feel for anything in the darkness.

“I bet it's a trap,” Sofia said. “Ya know, for people who come here who aren't supposed to. Like us. Makes sense to have it below the spot they'd most likely come to if they wanted in.”

Paul must've been exploring, too, because he bumped into Tick. “Oops, sorry.” He patted Tick on the shoulder then walked a different direction. “I don't know, Sofia. Maybe it's just a marker or something, and the way you actually get into the Factory is to come down here.”

Before Tick could say anything, a loud clang filled the air, and a source of faint light made him look to his left. A huge door had swung open, and a dark

figure stood in the widening crack, mostly in shadow because the glowing, orange light source was behind him. Or her. Or it. Tick couldn't quite tell yet.

The door opened all the way until it came to rest flush against the wall, their visitor standing alone in the doorway. Something was odd about the thing, and when the light behind it flared brighter, as if someone had stoked a fire, Tick got a good look for the first time.

It was man-sized and man-shaped, but any other comparison to a human being ended there. The creature had no eyes, no nose, no mouth, no ears. Its arms were stumps without hands. Winding strips of what looked like thick cotton covered every inch of the thing's body, protruding from the skin, moving and swaying back and forth like flags in the wind. Each strip was about a foot long, and they shot out from the body as if charged with static electricity.

"What . . . who . . ." Sofia began but didn't finish.

Tick and Paul remained silent.

The creature turned its head, looking without eyes at each of them in turn, its odd strips whipping the air like they were trying to escape and fly away.

A rush of chills ran along Tick's arms and shoulders.

A female voice came from somewhere down the tunnel, echoing and bouncing its way to them like scurrying bats. The voice was strong, but whispery. Scratchy. Creepy. It said only two words.

"Firekelt, burn."

In that instant, Tick remembered the water monsters that had tried to kill his mom and dad. Jane had called them *waterkelts*. *Kelts* must be some term she used for her new creations. And if this one was a *firekelt*—

Bright, flaring light cut off Tick's thought.

Each strip of cloth on the creature's body from head to toe ignited into searing hot fire, like a thousand old-fashioned wicks soaked in oil. Flames licked out in every direction, the blazing ribbons whooshing and spitting and hissing so that the monster looked like Medusa with fiery snakes.

Intense heat radiated from the firekelt and washed over Tick in waves as he backed away, Sofia and Paul right by his side. Sweat beaded on Tick's forehead, dripping into his eyes.

The creature took one step toward them, sudden and quick. Then another. The strips continued licking at the air like tiny solar flares, raging with fire but not burning up in the least.

"What do we do?" Tick shouted.

"Got a bucket of water on ya?" Paul responded.

"It won't hurt you," said a voice from behind the flaming monster, that same scratchy voice that had instructed it to burn in the first place. Tick

guessed it was Mistress Jane, and when she spoke again, he had no doubt. “Firekelt, extinguish.”

A great swooshing rush of air swept through the door and swirled inside the big room. It intensified, seeming to come from all directions at once and gusting back and forth like a hurricane. Tick instinctively reached out and grabbed Paul for support, feeling as if he were about to be swept off his feet. Sofia joined them, and they huddled together in a strange group hug.

The wind tore at the firekelt, whipping its flames toward Tick and the others. The odd wicks flapped tightly, parallel to each other as they tried to tear loose from the body of the creature. The fires flared brighter at first, but then flickered and sputtered under the enormous pressure of the windstorm. Each flame traveled down the course of the strips until they reached the ends, holding on for dear life. The creature waved its arms in frustration, helpless. Then the final small blazes winked out, throwing the room back into relative darkness.

The wind stopped without warning. The sudden silence that descended almost popped Tick’s ears. Hesitant, he let go of his friends. He looked at the firekelt, mostly in shadow again because of the faint orange light still coming from behind it.

The creature stood tall, defiant. Each flameless wick began to move about again as if a slight breeze still remained.

Mistress Jane spoke again, her raspy voice making Tick want to cough and clear his own throat. “The firekelts are mostly used for lighting purposes only. You’ll have to pardon my desire to show them off—I’m quite proud of my creations. Now, feel no alarm when it lights up again. Firekelt, burn.”

Sparse flames ignited on the tips of the wicks then worked themselves brighter and brighter, consuming the cloth-like tentacles for several seconds until they were fully on fire again. The light seemed even brighter this time; Tick finally had to look away, splotches of afterglow in his vision.

From the corner of his eye, he saw the firekelt turn away and walk out of the room, taking most of the light with it. Then the robed and hooded figure of Mistress Jane replaced the creature, standing in the doorway, the front of her completely in shadow. She clasped a tall staff made of wood in her heavily scarred right hand.

“Welcome to the Factory,” she said, as sincerely as a tour guide. “I’m sorry our last meeting didn’t go so well. I promise things are going to be different this time. Yes, things are going to be very, very different.”

The Fifth Army

Sato had finally asked all the people from Mothball's Reality to sit down, cross-legged, so he could actually see them as he spoke. Even then, the tops of their heads came to the middle of his chest, which made it all the more absurd that he was suddenly their leader. But there they were, rows of soldiers sitting on the checkered marble-like stone of this bizarre place, all eyes upon him.

After a long break, he'd reassembled the group. He had no clue how long it'd be before Tick—or whoever—winked them away. Or even if it was really going to happen.

No, he believed it. Tick's voice had been alive in that note, as had the urgency he felt. Something big was about to happen, and Sato had to get these people ready to help with it.

"You gonna stand there all day or talk to us?" said Rutger, sitting in the front row, just a few feet from Sato.

"Hold on! I'm thinking. If you wanna get up here and lead this army yourself, then do it!"

Instead of being taken aback, Rutger nodded, as if in approval. As if he were proud of his own son standing up here. This annoyed Sato greatly.

Next to Rutger were the Higginbottoms—Mom and Dad, Lisa and Kayla—the four of them having not separated an inch since being reunited. Of all the things that worried Sato about what was coming up, Tick's family was Number One. They obviously couldn't fight—not with Kayla to care for. They protested, of course, when Sato had pointed that out earlier, but even then it was halfhearted. Their first priority had to be keeping Kayla safe, and going to off to battle wasn't the best way to do that. But Sato didn't know what else to do with them.

He realized he was staring at the family; Mr. Higgin-bottom tentatively waved at him. Sato shook his head slightly and tried to save himself by smiling. *Okay*, he thought, *I have to get on with this*.

He returned his attention to the waiting rows of Fifths. "I guess it's time for my big motivational speech. We could be winked away from here at any second to the Thirteenth Reality, where very dangerous stuff is going to happen. I hope you're all a little more aware of things like winking and other worlds by now—I know Mothball and her family have been around talking to

you all about it. Well, none of that matters much. All we need to care about is that we're going to a bad place, and we need to save some good people and a lot of children."

He was relieved to hear a low rumble of positive responses—"Yeah," and "Let's get 'em," and "Ruddy ready, we are"—along with vigorous nods and shaking of fists. These really were a warrior people—Sato would never doubt it again. How the Bugaboos had lasted this long against them, he had no idea. Of course, they came from the same stock, he supposed . . .

"We've got no weapons!" someone shouted from the back, breaking into his thoughts. Then another person called out, "Don't even know who we're ruddy fighting! Or what!"

Instinct told Sato what he needed to say in response. If their confidence was going to be solidified, it needed to come from within. "Good questions! So, are you saying we should give up? Not even try? Throw in the towel?"

A chorus of angry denials thundered through the vast space, a deafening roar backed by red faces and pumping fists. Some even stood, looking as if they might charge Sato and wallop him for even suggesting such a thing.

"No, I didn't think so!" he yelled as loud as he possibly could. The Fifts quieted. "We'll fight with our hands and our feet, with sticks and stones! We'll fight with our elbows and knees! Whatever it takes!"

A shocked silence greeted this last part. Mothball finally said from her spot, "A bit much, but I like your spirit, I do." A few chuckles rose from the crowd.

Sato would have none of it. "I don't care if it's a *bit much*. If you guys wanna take this as a joke and treat me like a little kid, then fine! But we don't have weapons, so we have to be willing to *do* terrible things to *stop* the terrible things we're about to see! Are you willing or not?"

Impossibly, the chorus that greeted him was even stronger than before, piercing his eardrums with a needle of sharp pain. The roar went on and on, and this time every single Fifth stood up, arms raised to the sky, shouting and screaming. Sato let it go on, looking around with a stoic face, accepting their display of devotion.

When it started to die down naturally, he lit into them again. "When this is over, when we've gone to the Thirteenth and rescued our friends, when we've destroyed this unnatural and evil factory of creatures, we won't stop. We'll go back to your world, we'll gather more people—the greatest army the world has ever seen—and we'll wipe the Bugaboos from existence!"

More shouts, more cheers. Sato kept going, trying with all his might to increase the volume of his already strained voice.

"We are the Fifth Army! Say it with me! The Fifth Army!"

He raised a fist to the sky and screamed the words, ripping his throat to

pieces. “The Fifth Army! The Fifth Army! The Fifth Army!” His soldiers shouted the words along with him, a sound so loud it seemed to shake the strange floor upon which they stood.

Sato stopped, knowing he’d need his voice in the hours to come. The others didn’t quit, however, and kept chanting as if they never planned to stop.

Rutger stepped to Sato’s side. “Nice work. Now what?”

“Now we wait for the call,” Sato said. “It’s coming, and when it does, we’ll be ready.”

~

Lisa watched the pep rally with mixed feelings—a whole barrage of them.

Her parents sat to either side of her, Kayla in her lap, the four present members of the Higginbottom clan clasped in an awkward but wonderful hug. Despite having everything in their world turned upside down, Lisa felt safe at the moment. But deep down she knew the feeling was fleeting, and there were a thousand and one things to worry about.

Sato’s speech had really shocked her. He’d seemed quiet for one thing, and then to suddenly stand in front of this crowd of human giants and speak so loudly and convincingly was quite a thing to see. She thought his speech was a little bit on the cheesy side with a few roll-the-eye moments, but that’s what you needed for something like this. Overall, very impressive.

But still.

What could they do? What could a few hundred people—even tall, gangly, gimme-some-blood warrior giants—do against this psycho lady Mistress Jane? And more importantly—personally, selfishly—what was going to happen to Lisa and her family? They couldn’t go to this Thirteenth Reality place and fight. The idea was ridiculous. She almost laughed at the picture of herself running around like a chimpanzee trying to jump on bad guys and, what—bite their ears?

Plus, there was Kayla to think about. Lisa and her parents had already decided that the battles and the mysteries and the monsters should be left to the Realitants—including her own brother, Tick. For the rest of the Higginbottoms, staying away from danger and protecting Kayla was all that mattered. They couldn’t do much else, anyway.

Could they?

Lisa hugged Kayla a little tighter to her chest.

~

The Haunce floated in eternity.

The Haunce floated in the spaces between the spaces, in the darkness between the light, the light between the darkness. It floated in the smallest of

the small and the largest of the large. It was everywhere and nowhere, up and down, left and right, big and small.

The Haunce floated and watched, its countless soulizens observing and communicating on a scale no individual human could ever understand.

The lull in the catastrophe Jane had started was almost over. The slipping and cracking and shattering of the Barriers would resume soon. And then it wouldn't stop until all was lost.

Atticus had reached Jane. They were together in the Factory.

It was time.

The Haunce floated—and watched.

Then it acted.

First, remembering the most human of emotions—compassion—it sent the family of Atticus back to their home. There, they would be safe, as long as everything went according to plan.

Once done with that—a thing that took less than a nanosecond of time—the Haunce winked Sato and his makeshift army to the Thirteenth Reality.

Part 4

Chi'karda's Power

Talking with the Devil

Tick and his two friends followed Mistress Jane down a long tunnel dug into the bedrock beneath ground, the hissing flames of the firekelt the only sound and light. No one spoke, no one asked questions, no one made any threats against anyone's life. Tick rattled his thoughts with each step, trying to come up with the best way to talk to Jane about what needed to happen and to convince her that they needed to put their heads and powers together to stop the Realities from imploding.

But he didn't know what to say or do. Was he supposed to wait for the Haunce to show up? He sure hoped so, because he didn't have the first clue how to go about things.

They turned a corner around a jagged edge of dark stone, Jane and her fiery creation a step ahead of them. But Tick stopped. He felt and heard the same womping sound he'd experienced back in the woods near his home, right before finding Jane in his basement. Right before this whole mess started.

Womp.

There it was again—a faint but definite pulse of energy, the vibration of horns and bees.

Womp.

Paul and Sofia took another couple of steps before noticing he'd quit walking.

"What's wrong?" Sofia asked.

Jane noticed as well, turning around to face them. She tilted her wooden staff forward as though about to strike him with some magical spell. The wavering splashes of light from the dancing firekelt flames turned her red mask the hue of wet blood.

Womp.

"Why have you stopped?" the robed tyrant asked in her painful, raspy voice. "Don't even think of trying anything—there's more Chi'karda coiled inside this Barrier Staff than you've seen in all your prior glimpses combined. I programmed it especially for you, Atticus Higginbottom. It's set to unleash its fury on you the second you even breathe a wisp of the power."

Womp.

Tick felt each and every energy pulse like a wall of water crashing over

him. “I just . . . I just keep feeling surges of Chi’karda. Why?” He ignored her threat about her Barrier Staff; they had bigger problems to solve before he could worry about himself.

Jane hesitated, her mask void of expression, probably mulling over whether he was being sincere or trying to trick her. Finally, she said, “You and I are very sensitive to the ripples of energy triggered by Chi’karda, Atticus. I think it’s something you picked up since growing more in tune with the power inside you. Get used to it, or it’ll drive you crazy. Especially in the Factory, where it’s constantly churning. Now come on—I want to show you something.”

Womp. This time the pulse did feel a little more distant, like a constant breeze that he’d grown accustomed to. Or maybe more like breathing—you realize it’s happening only when you think about it.

“Jane . . .” Tick began, wanting to bring up the subject of his mission and get it over with. But the words lodged somewhere down his throat.

“You will call me *Mistress Jane*,” she said with a flare of anger on her mask. “After the horrible things you’ve done to me, I would think you could at least find a smattering of respect for your elders. For your superiors.”

Tick didn’t care about his pride anymore. He didn’t even feel an ounce of fear for this woman. The only thing that mattered—that throbbed in his mind like a beating heart—was what the Haunce wanted him to do.

“I’m sorry. *Mistress Jane*. Whatever. We’ll do whatever it is you want us to, and we’ll see whatever it is you want us to see, but we need to talk first. Something really bad is about to happen, and I . . . we . . . need your help.”

Jane’s face melted into a slight frown, a look of curiosity on her mask. She took a few steps toward him. “I can tell you’re not lying. What are you talking about?”

Her response surprised Tick, and something told him that the only reason she didn’t fly off the handle was because she already suspected the truth. He played for that angle. “You have to know that things really went screwy when you tried to destroy the Fifth Reality with your dark matter Blade of Shattered Hope. Well, things are worse than you think. A lot worse. You made the Barriers unstable and ignited a whole bunch of bad stuff that’s gonna end up wiping us all away. We have only a few hours until we’ll all be dead—thanks to you.”

Jane didn’t answer for a long time, her eyes concentrating on Tick, her hand gripping the odd staff. Tick wondered if maybe it just looked like wood but was actually something else. She’d called it a *Barrier Staff* . . .

She finally spoke. “How could you know these things, Atticus? What kind of trick—”

“It’s not a trick!” Tick yelled. “You’re supposed to be the grown-up here!

Act like it! The Haunce rescued me from you—and it told me all this stuff. Your Blade of Shattered Hope did something really bad to the Realities, and we have one chance to fix it.”

Her red mask sharpened and tightened into a fit of rage; she visibly shook.

Tick knew he had to save himself, and quickly. “I’m sorry—just please listen to me! If I’m lying, you can do whatever you want to me, I swear. I promise I won’t even touch Chi’karda. Just please listen.”

Womp.

There it was again, the first time he’d noticed the energy pulse in several minutes. Jane had been right—he was getting used to it.

“You dare stand there,” Jane said, “looking at me with that pathetic little innocent face of yours, and tell me this? That the Haunce visited you? Spoke to you? You expect me to believe such nonsense? You almost had me until you took it that far. Your capacity for evil was proven quite well back in the Fourth, but to lie like that . . . amazing. Do you even have a conscience?”

Tick sucked in a few dry breaths, frustrated into silence. He wouldn’t have guessed she’d believe him right away, but her tone and arrogance made it seem as if she wouldn’t even consider the truth. He finally snagged some words and forced them out.

“Seriously, Ja—Mistress Jane? You’re seriously going to act like that and not even hear me out? Are you so full of yourself that you’d risk the whole universe?” He threw his arms up then slapped the sides of his legs. “Unbelievable. Fine—do what you want. The Haunce’ll be coming here soon anyway. Maybe you’ll believe it.”

Jane walked toward him again, not stopping until she stood only a foot or two away. Her yellow robe glowed in the firelight; her now-stoic mask shimmered and glistened. Her scarred, metal-pocked hand gripped the Staff tightly, the bones seemingly ready to burst through the taut skin.

“Look into my eyes, boy,” she whispered, a sandy croak of sound.

“I already am,” Tick replied, standing as straight as he could and holding onto the small amount of courage he’d scrounged up from within. “All I can see are little black holes with no life in ’em.”

“You . . .” She made an odd squeak like someone holding back tears. “If it weren’t for you, things would be so different. I could’ve stopped Chu and used his technology for good. I wouldn’t be scarred and hideous from head to toe. Do you have any idea how hard it is to lead when people can’t even glance at you? Do you have any idea how humiliating it is to look like a monster? And if it weren’t for you, the Blade would’ve functioned perfectly, and we’d be on our way to a Utopian Reality. But no, you’ve ruined everything. You’ve ruined my . . .”

She stopped and shook her head slightly. “No. I won’t say that. You’ve

made things difficult—no doubt about it. But you haven't ruined everything. You haven't ruined my life. Do you know why, Atticus? Because I won't give up. I'll overcome it all, and in the end, I . . . will . . . win. I promise you."

Tick momentarily lost every bit of hatred for the woman. Every bit of frustration and angst. The only thing he felt was pity. And the familiar pang of guilt for what he'd done to her.

"Mistress Jane," he said. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry for what I did in Chu's building. I promise I didn't mean to. I swear."

"You're sorry, you promise, you swear. Too little, too late, as they say." She started to turn from him.

Tick reached out and grabbed a fold of her robe. She spun and knocked his hand away, glaring at him. "Don't . . . touch . . . me!"

Tick stepped back, trying to shrink into the wall behind him. A spark of Chi'karda flared inside him, but he pushed it away. Something about that tall staff gripped in her hand terrified him. Plus, this was no time to battle her—he had to win her over.

"I'm sorry," he said again, trying to throw as much humility into his voice as possible.

Jane touched the top edge of her staff to Tick's head, then pulled it back. "I'm not a fool, Atticus. I'll listen to what you have to say. But first, you will come and see the Factory. I want you to see my gift to science. I want you to see me change the world."

And with that, she turned away and set off down the tunnel.

Splitting Up

One second, Lisa had been sitting on the cold, hard floor of the magical nowhere place, Kayla gripped in her arms. The next, she felt a tingle shoot down her back, and their surroundings changed completely. From light to dark, from vast and open to close quarters. She sat on something soft. Kayla was still in her lap, Mom on her left, Dad on her right.

“We’re home,” her dad said, squirming to stand up. “We’re home!”

Lisa knew he was right before he’d said it the second time. The faintest glimmer of dawn—or twilight?—shone through the curtains of their living room windows. She saw the worn-out armchair her mom always sat in to wait for them after school, the piano, the crooked arrangement of family photos on the wall.

Dad stood in the middle of the room, slowly turning with his arms outstretched like that lady in the wildflower-strewn mountain field in *The Sound of Music*. Though he looked a lot more ridiculous. Lisa laughed, which sent Kayla into a fit of giggles.

“I think we’ve officially had the strangest day in the history of our family,” Mom said, leaning back on the sofa with her arms folded, smiling at Dad. “But I have to say, I’m a little offended that whoever is in charge doesn’t think we could help out in this fight of theirs.”

Dad toppled a bit, obviously having grown dizzy. He collapsed into the armchair, its springs groaning in complaint. “Come on, dear. We’re not cut out for that stuff. Especially with Kayla and Lisa to think about. Let the Realitants do their job—and I’m sure Tick’ll be home safe and sound before we know it.”

Lisa agreed about Kayla, but felt a little swell of self-defense spring up inside her. “Hey, speak for yourself, Dad. I could’ve helped Sato. Put me in a room with this Mistress Jane witch, and I’ll show her what bony knees and sharp nails I have.”

Mom reached over and squeezed Lisa’s knee. “That’s my girl. Maybe old Master George will be knocking on our door for you once this is over.” She looked down at the floor, her smile fading. Then she seemed to catch herself and brought it back, returning her gaze to Lisa.

“What, Mom?” Lisa said. “What’s wrong?”

Her mom had a second of surprise on her face, probably chagrined that

she'd been caught. "Oh, well, it's nothing really. I guess I just feel a little ashamed that I quit being a Realitant all those years ago."

Lisa thought long and hard about that. She gave Kayla a squeeze before gently pushing her over to sit with Dad, who took her into his arms while his eyes darted back and forth between Lisa and Mom.

"What's goin' on in those heads of yours?" he asked.

Lisa reached out and took her mom's hand, helping her stand up. "Dad, Mom and I are gonna play a big part in all this. Somehow. Aren't we, Mom?"

Mom stared at her with glistening eyes. "Why . . . yes, Lisa. Yes, I think we are."

"Good. Let's be ready when the time comes."

~

Sato had known it was coming—hoped it was coming, anyway—but he still felt a thrill of shock when the winking tingle scooted across his neck and back. He instinctively started to yell at the people of the Fifth to get ready, but of course, by the time any words popped out of his mouth, they'd already arrived at their location.

They stood in a big field of drying mud. The morning sun had just lifted over a forest to their left, its brilliance cutting through the last leaves and branches at the very top. To their right was a huge wall of stacked logs, stretching in both directions until they curved away and disappeared. The air smelled truly awful, like a rotting dump.

Sato had a few horrible seconds when self-doubt hit him as he looked back at his army. Most of them were gawking left and right at the place to which they'd come, many patting their chests and arms in disbelief at the seemingly magical experience of having been winked there. Sato didn't know what he'd been thinking—how could he lead an army? He had zero experience, zero training, zero confidence. What was he supposed to do? Yell, "Charge!" and start rushing the fence? The whole idea seemed ridiculous all of a sudden.

The Fifths appeared to be gathering their wits a lot quicker than he was. Sato watched as they stood in rows, composed and standing at attention, waiting for him to give a command. They really were warriors. They really did consider him their leader.

Buck up, he told himself. When this is all over, then you can sit down and have a good cry about it.

"Okay, listen up!" he yelled. Rutger, Mothball, and her parents were standing right in front of him in the very first row. He exchanged glances with his two fellow Realitants, relieved to see there'd be no teasing. Time for business.

When the Fifths had quieted and all the attention turned to Sato, he continued. "We don't know what to expect, what kind of defenses they have,

who's watching us—anything. Jane could send a whole pack of fangen or who-knows-what at us any second now, so we need to get moving. I want us to split into three groups: left, right, middle.” He pointed as he spoke. “Middle group stays here, close to the fence. Rutger, you and I will stay with them.”

The short man nodded, his face scrunched up as if considering whether he'd gotten a good assignment or a bad one.

Sato pointed to the left. “Left group, you guys go around the perimeter that way. Right group, go that way.” He pointed in the opposite direction. “I want you to run as quickly as possible while still being able to keep a good lookout. With any luck, you'll make your way around that wall and meet up on the other side. Then come back here. We'll decide what to do based on what you learn.”

As the Fifths separated into smaller groups, Sato started doubting his first major decision. What if they were attacked? What if, by splitting up, they'd weakened themselves too much? What if the groups never hooked back up again? What if . . . what if . . . what if?

He shook it off. He couldn't do anything until he knew what they were dealing with, and it seemed too dangerous to send individual spies out to scout the area. He was sticking with his decision, and that was that. He had nothing but his instinct.

“Okay, then! Go, already!” He shooed them like dogs, and immediately made a mental note that he probably shouldn't do that ever again.

But they didn't seem to mind. Mothball, her parents, and the rest of their group sprinted toward the right, heading for the fence. Once they were right next to it, they took off running alongside it. The left group did the same thing but in the opposite direction. Those ordered to stay put gathered tighter around Sato.

Rutger stood right next to him and reached up to poke him on the upper arm. “I'm proud of you, Sato. Have to admit, I didn't wake up this morning thinking I'd see General Sato by the end of the day, but here we are. Don't worry—worst thing that can happen is we all die.”

Sato grumbled, not in the mood.

Rutger kept talking as if they were sitting down for a nice picnic. “I'm really happy about how it worked out. You need someone cranky to lead like this, and . . .”

Sato tuned him out, searching for signs of guards or visitors. He couldn't see very well over the tall Fifths, so he stepped out of the crowd, scanning the area with his eyes. The day was fully bright now, not a cloud in the sky.

A quick movement in the woods caught the corner of his eye, like someone had poked their head out to look around, then pulled back again, hiding. But when Sato focused his attention on the spot, he saw nothing but trees.

Sato pointed at three Fifths, one by one. “You, you, and you,” he said, making another note to learn these peoples’ names. “Come with me.”

Rutger finally realized he wasn’t being listened to. “Hey, what’s going on?”

“Just be quiet,” Sato replied. “Let’s go.”

He moved away from the rest of them with the three Fifths he’d chosen right on his heels. Keeping his eyes glued to the spot where he’d seen the movement, Sato ran for the forest. He’d made it about halfway to the tree when a figure darted out from behind it—an oddly shaped, wispy thing. It seemed to fly through the air like a ghost, quickly disappearing deeper into the dark woods.

Then other creatures did the same, darting out from behind at least a dozen other trees that lined the boundary between the field and the forest. They were all like living, flying shadows, gone before Sato got a better look.

He stopped and held up a hand. “Those had to be some kind of spies or guards. Now Jane or whoever’s in charge of this place definitely knows we’re here. I hope I didn’t—”

A commotion from behind cut him off. He turned to see Rutger excitedly pointing toward the far bend of the wooden fence to the right, where the group of Fifths that had gone in that direction was already coming back, marching along through the slippery mud.

“Something’s wrong,” Sato half-whispered. “They shouldn’t be back yet.”

He headed in that direction, running as fast as he could, determined to meet up with them and see what was happening. He’d only gone about a hundred feet when he noticed several of the Fifths working together to carry large wooden boxes. Also, two newcomers were with them, looking very out of place. Sato almost fell down, already knowing what this meant and feeling like they’d won their first victory.

It was Master George—his Barrier Wand in tow—and Sally from headquarters.

More importantly, Sato was sure the boxes they carried had weapons inside them.

A Very Bad Smell

Tick, man,” Paul whispered to him as they followed Jane down the seemingly endless tunnels. “What’s going on? Is she for real about that staff of hers? Is it some kind of Barrier Wand on steroids?”

Tick shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. But I can’t risk anything right now. We just need to stick with her and wait for the Haunce to come, I guess. Don’t do anything to tick her off!”

“Tick her off,” Sofia repeated through a halfhearted laugh. “That has meaning on so many levels, it’s ridiculous.”

Paul snickered. “I gare-on-tee you could take her, Superman. I’m not worried.”

Tick rolled his eyes even though the others probably couldn’t tell. He wasn’t in the mood to talk to anyone, much less hear the junk about his powers. Despite what had happened so far, he felt no more like a superhero than he would a bird if someone glued wings on his back.

Jane reached a large shiny, metal door, big silver bolts lining the edges. It seemed almost too modern for the cavernous feel of the tunnels through which they’d been walking forever.

As they approached the door, Tick felt an increase in magnitude of the womps—the rhythmic pulses vibrating his teeth and skull.

Jane turned around to face them. The firekelt stood slightly ahead of her and to the left, and the light from its flames illuminated her perfectly. She spoke in her desert-sand voice.

“I don’t know what you’ve heard about the Factory, but you’re about to witness it firsthand. I’ll admit that my pride has gotten the better part of me today. I desperately want to show this to the three of you—especially you, Atticus. Otherwise I wouldn’t bother with the extra protection of my Barrier Staff and would’ve killed you already. Your lingering presence in the Realities is beginning to disturb me. Greatly.”

“So you’re gonna show us your evil factory and then kill us?” Paul asked, his tone full of the usual sarcasm. “What is this, a bad James Bond movie?” Jane’s mask didn’t show any anger. Tick thought she probably didn’t want to give Paul the satisfaction. “Please, boy. What you’re about to see will be so above your mental capacity and intellect that even if you escaped, you’d barely be able describe it, much less share any of my secrets. Just consider

this a whim of mine. Nothing more.”

“You said you’d hear me out,” Tick said. “We don’t have time for this!”

“Patience, Atticus. A short trip through my house of wonders, and then you can talk. Now, if you don’t mind, I’ll be the only one talking from this point on.”

“Could you maybe drink some cough syrup first?” Paul asked.

This time Jane’s mask did fill with rage as she pointed the upper tip of the Staff at Paul. An instant later, his entire body lifted up from the ground and slammed against the wall. He tried to scream, but nothing came out—only a slight gurgling in the bottom of his throat. His face turned purple with pain, and his hands squeezed into fists.

“Stop it, Jane!” Tick yelled, unable to stop the surge of Chi’karda that ignited inside him. “Leave him alone!”

Jane pointed the Staff at Tick; Paul dropped in a heap of arms and legs onto the floor. “Don’t even think about it, Atticus. Pull your Chi’karda back, right now!”

Tick closed his eyes for a second, calming his heart. The spits of lava flaring in his chest pattered out, cooled. He still breathed heavily, though, as he looked at Jane once again. “You didn’t have to do that to him.”

Paul groaned and shifted his body. At least he seemed okay.

Jane’s mask still held onto its anger. “I don’t like him. He’s a smart aleck. Tell him to keep his mouth shut.” Her face melted back into the void as she turned toward the silver door once again.

Sofia immediately moved to help Paul to his feet, being more gentle than Tick had ever seen her before. Paul hunched over slightly, his face maybe forever locked into a grimace of pain, but, surprisingly, he said nothing.

Sofia looked at Tick and mouthed the words, “We’re dead.”

Tick shook his head adamantly but didn’t say anything. Movement from Jane grabbed his attention.

She placed her right hand on the center of the silver door. Shocked, Tick watched as the metal seemed to liquefy at her touch. Jane’s hand sank into the gray goop up to the wrist. A second later she pulled her hand back out again. Tick expected the metal surface to ripple like a pond, but it didn’t, solidifying instantly instead.

Then, with a great rumbling sound, the entire door slid to the right, disappearing into the rock and revealing a very modern-looking hallway ahead of them, with white tile floors, fluorescent lights on the ceiling, and glass windows on the walls.

“All the doors in the Factory have a Reality Echo,” Jane explained. “That means it’s actually a combination of matter taken from more than one Reality,

visible in each place but absolutely impossible to open no matter what you do. Explosives, tanks, the strongest battering ram ever made—none of it would work. Only the pre-approved cellular structure of those previously recorded by my people can do it.”

She looked at them over her shoulder, her mask alive with arrogance. “Even I wouldn’t be able to use my powers to dissolve the material without an extraordinary amount of effort. The door is literally in different Realities simultaneously—therefore, nothing existing solely in this one could make it move. Reality Echo. Impressed?”

Tick nodded before he could stop himself. He was impressed.

Paul let out a low whistle, a small but telling sign to Tick that Jane hadn’t killed his spirit completely, not yet—Tick hoped not ever.

“The door is nothing compared to what you’re about to see,” Jane said, a hint of giddiness in her voice. “Follow me.”

She entered the brightly lit hallway, her shoes—hidden beneath the folds of her long robe—tapping on the tile floor. Tick hesitated a second before following, terrified of what horrors they might be about to see, not to mention the worry eating at him about the Haunce and what they were supposed to accomplish. His chest tight with every breath, he stepped through the doorway along with Paul and Sofia.

The first section consisted of offices—normal human people dressed in normal human clothes tapping away at computer keyboards with monitors, printers, and servers everywhere. Several odd-looking machines were also scattered about the desks, similar to the machines they’d seen back in the desert. But nothing too out of the ordinary. If Tick didn’t know better, he would have thought it was an accounting business.

“This is where data is analyzed,” Jane explained without turning around. She kept walking. “It’s also where oversight of the melding processes takes place—a tricky operation that needs tight supervision.”

Melding processes? Tick thought. She acted like she’d said *cereal production* or *car manufacturing*. How could she be so callous?

They came to another massive metal door exactly like the first one. Jane shoved her hand into the silver goop, and soon this one opened up as well. A rancid smell of decay surged through the door like an infested wind. Tick and his friends coughed and sputtered, covering their noses. Tick tried to breathe only through his mouth, but then he tasted the air, which was even worse.

“What is that?” Sofia managed to choke out.

“It’s the smell of progress,” Jane said as she entered the barely lit hallway on the other side.

Tick, despite the putrid smell, despite his queasiness, couldn’t help but feel extremely curious. The surging, throbbing pulses of invisible power

emanating from the open door pounded his senses.
He followed Jane into the stinky darkness.

Weapons of Mass Coolness

Sato kept trying to dampen his emotions, stay levelheaded, but a new surge of confidence swelled inside him. For the first time, he felt like they were a real army with a real chance.

Now they had weapons.

The reunion with Master George and Sally had been thrilling but brief, exchanging barely a dozen words before they turned their full attention to the large wooden boxes. The Fifths looked like their eyes might pop, they were so excited and intrigued by what Mothball and Sally started pulling out of the crates, George explaining their uses in his very sophisticated voice, Rutger butting in now and then to say how cool this or that was.

The usual: boxes of Ragers—those little balls of compacted static electricity that exploded on impact in a display of destructive lightning. Some Shurricks—large guns of sonic power that devastated with sound waves.

A couple of new things as well: Squeezers, which were grenades full of tiny but extremely strong wires. When it exploded, the wires shot out and latched onto whatever was closest, then immediately retracted and curled up, no matter what the material. Very nasty results.

Finally, there was the Halter. A thin but sturdy plastic tube that ended in a cone, with a simple trigger on one end of the tube and a small cartridge on the other. Each cartridge equaled one shot: a spray of tiny darts spread out and injected its victims—potentially dozens if it hit a group—with a serum that immediately paralyzed them for hours. It was a variation of what Master George had created for Sofia to stop Tick's madness at Chu's headquarters. Very effective.

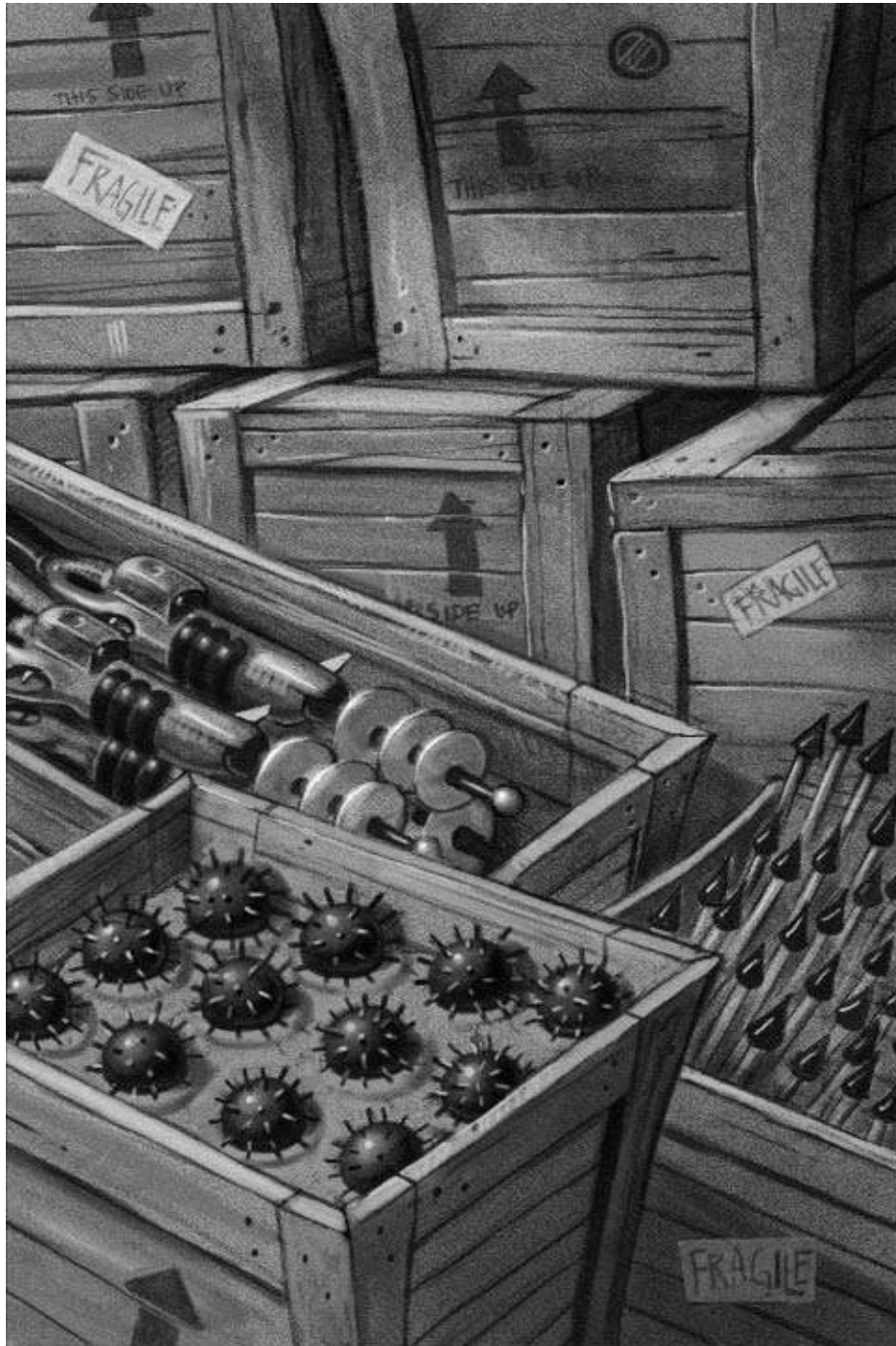
Ragers, Shurricks, Squeezers, Halters. Plenty to go around.

This could be fun.

The other group that had gone exploring returned about a half-hour after Master George's arrival, saying they found nothing but a very long, encircling wooden fence, with only one exception—a gate of iron bars. The only thing they could see through it was a small grove of trees and nothing they did would open up the gate or make someone appear. So they'd come back, relieved to see why they hadn't met up with the others on the far side.

Once the weapons had been passed out and the wooden boxes thrown into the forest to hide them—though they were probably being spied on anyway—

the entire Fifth Army gathered around Sato. Time for business.



“Okay,” Sato began, his voice raised. “Seems like we’ve got no choice but to climb over that stupid fence. It’s probably about thirty feet high, but there are plenty of handholds and footholds, so it shouldn’t be too hard. I’m just worried about what might be waiting for us when we pop our heads over the edge. Once we have a good, solid group of twenty or so right at the top, we’ll throw volleys of Ragers and Squeezers to clear the way, and then we’ll send the first group over to cover with Shurric fire while the rest of us enter. Sound good?”

Rutger tapped Sato on the arm. “What about me? Don’t see myself rolling

up the side of that fence very easily.”

Sato had to hold in a laugh—he didn’t want to embarrass his friend. “I think you, Sally, and Master George should use the Wand to go back to headquarters, monitor us, and wink us out when we’re ready.”

The look of relief that washed over Rutger before he quickly wiped it away made Sato like him more than ever. George stepped closer, pulling a yellow envelope from the inner pocket of his suit coat.

“Goodness gracious me,” he said, ripping the envelope open. “I almost forgot the most important part.” He pulled out a handful of square pieces of paper—no more than an inch on each side—then shook them on his flat palm for everyone to get a look.

“What are those?” Sato asked.

“Nanolocator patches.” George poured the square pieces back into the envelope, then pulled a single one out and held it between his thumb and forefinger. “There are hundreds here, and all you need to do is slap this against the skin of any person. The microscopic nanolocator will immediately slide off the patch and onto the subject, at which point we can wink them away. If we’re looking to rescue children from this miserable place, these patches will be our best shot.”

Sato was amazed and thrilled. Solutions to his two biggest concerns had been opened up for him—how they’d fight without weapons, and how they’d herd a bunch of potentially injured, suffering children safely away while fighting Jane’s monsters. Everything was in place.

“This is great,” Sato said, ignoring that small part in his brain that said it all seemed too easy. Meeting whatever waited inside the Factory would probably cure him of that, and quickly. “You guys wink back to headquarters now. We’ll take it from here.”

George handed him the envelope. “Best of luck, then. There are plenty of those patches, so be sure to put them on everyone here first—except you and Mothball, of course. We already have you pegged. We’ll have all the information we need back in the Control Room, and we’ll be watching closely, I assure you. Sally will be at the Grand Canyon HQ with Priscilla Persephone from the Seventh to help with the children—we’ll send them directly there.”

“Just call me Papa Sally,” the big man said. “Might even read dem squirts a story or two ’bout the old days on the chicken farm.”

“Sounds good,” Sato said. “Now you guys get out of here—time’s wasting. I mean . . . please, whatever.”

George hardly seemed to notice. He made a few adjustments to the Barrier Wand, had Rutger and Sally put their hands on it, and then the three of them disappeared. A few oohs and ahs escaped the Fifths.

Sato handed the envelope of nanolocator patches to Mothball. “Pass those out. We climb the wall in five minutes.”

~

After sending Sally off to the Grand Canyon, Master George got straight to work at the Bermuda Triangle headquarters, walking around the mesh metal walkways of the confined and claustrophobic structure, pointing left and right.

“Rutger, I want every computer in this building set up in the Control Room. I want the Big Board lined up and ready to go with monitoring all those nanolocators. Put a call out to all Realitants—if they can make it here to help, so be it. With all the destruction, they may be needed elsewhere, but make them aware of our plans, anyway.”

Rutger waddled to keep up, saying, “Okay,” after every instruction.

“We need to help Sally and Priscilla set up a refugee camp at the Grand Canyon. They’ll need beds and clothes and doctors and who knows what else! We also need to come up with a contingency plan—so many things could go wrong. And we—”

“Master George?” Rutger asked.

“Yes?”

“I got it.”

“Good, then. Let’s get moving!”

Rutger cleared his throat. “Could you, um, at least make me a sandwich while I’m doing all this work? I’m starving.”

The Factory

The dark and smelly hallway, its walls made of black stone, wet and slimy, went about fifty feet before it came to its first window. Tick could see it just ahead of Mistress Jane when she stopped and turned to face them, but he couldn't tell what was behind the window. A sick anticipation poisoned his veins. The firekelt was behind them now, throwing their giant shadows along the floor like flat creatures of the night.

"What we do here," Jane began, "is the coordination of my lifetime's work in the fields of science with the special characteristics of the mutated Chi'karda in the Thirteenth Reality. We use bio-engineering, genetic restructuring and manipulation, and chemistry. But without the special touch of . . . shall we say magic? No, that's such a dirty word. It's all semantics, I guess. But without the special power of the Thirteenth's Chi'karda, all of this would suffer from a missing link."

She raised her arms, the robe fanning out like a fallen angel's wings. "But here, where I've put it all together to showcase the greatest scientific achievements of all human history—here is where the revolution of the Realities has begun. Here is where we begin our journey to a perfect place for all mankind. In a thousand years, they will look back and say it began with me. Now, watch and learn. Watch and let yourself feel wonder."

The mask on her face showed something like ecstasy, the black holes of her eyes actually widening for the first time Tick could remember seeing. She looked completely crazy.

"Amazing how humble you are," Sofia said. Tick was glad she spoke and not Paul, because he might not have survived the punishment a second time around. "If your intentions are so pure, then why do you care so much about taking all the credit? Sounds like a power trip to me."

Jane lowered her arms, her look of rapture melting into a glare. "Don't judge me, you spoiled, rich brat. Always had everything you wanted, always pampered, always safe. Always judging those less fortunate than you. Don't . . . judge . . . me." These last three words came out so enflamed that Sofia took a step backward and didn't respond.

"Now," Jane said in a much nicer voice, though laced with an icy insincerity. "The three of you will step up and look through the first observation window. You will say nothing, and you will not look away. You

will not close your eyes. I, also, will remain silent, letting you get a good look before I explain what it is you're witnessing." She stepped to the far side, opposite the window, and gestured toward it with her Staff. "Now come."

Tick and his friends exchanged quick glances, then stepped forward until they stood together in front of the large glass square. Tick felt the struggle of each and every breath as he leaned forward, the window mere inches from his nose.

He looked. His mind jumped to full capacity trying to take in and understand all that he saw.

The room he observed was about forty feet square and dimly lit, mainly from four pale yellow panels on the ceiling. Three beds occupied the middle of the floor, lined up to form the edges of a triangle, the closest bed empty and parallel to the window. In the center of the triangle stood a hunched over monster of a man at least eight feet tall with his back to them. He wore black clothes and had no hair on his head. His massive back was covered in a tattered shirt, and the skin beneath the ripped clothing was wet with bloody gashes. The man didn't move anything but his arms, typing away at what Tick assumed was a computer on the other side of his gigantic body.

Tick turned his attention to the very different occupants of the other two beds, which lay at angles to either side of the workman. A large, odd-shaped tube, maybe ten inches in diameter, snaked from rafters in the ceiling and connected to the two bodies at the chest—right over the heart—linking them together. The left bed contained a large raven—black as oil and two feet tall. The bird barely moved; every few seconds its wings twitched, making Tick think it must be awake on some level and suffering horribly.

A good-sized black bear occupied the bed on the right side. It was bigger than the bed and looked underfed and abused, lying there as if asleep, its big paws occasionally twitching. The bear was also strapped down, that tube arching out of its chest to the rafter above before continuing across the ceiling and then back down to the bird.

Tick focused on that tube. It didn't seem to be made out of artificial material—it looked . . . alive. Like skin. Blue veins ran throughout the long object, just underneath the pale, translucent material, pulsing and changing shades from dark to light to dark again. The ends connected to the raven and the bear looked as if they had grown there like a natural extension. There was no sign of stitches or staples.

Two beds with two bodies. A bird and a bear. Connected by some kind of bio-engineered, monstrous-looking tube. The third bed was empty.

What did it all mean? What horrific thing was Jane doing to these poor creatures? Tick's hands shook; he reached out and pressed his fingers against the lower sill of the window to steady them. Out of the corner of his eye, he

noticed that Paul and Sofia had actually clasped their hands together.

The third bed. What was the third bed for?

Jane spoke from behind them, her voice soft and low. Never before had it sounded so evil as it did then.

“What you see here—and more important, what you are about to see—is a miracle of science and technology that today’s doctors and scientists can’t even imagine, or wish for, or dream about. It’s simply beyond their wildest spheres of possibility, beyond their capacity to comprehend. And even if they could, they’d never be able to make it happen. Not unless they were here and had a hundred years to figure it out.”

“I think what you really mean,” Tick said, throwing all the hatred he could into his voice, “is that they wouldn’t be evil enough to do something like this. You’re sick, Jane. Totally psycho. I don’t feel bad for what I did to you anymore.” He shouldn’t have said it; he knew that. Not yet. Not until things with the Haunce were worked out. But he couldn’t stop himself.

“I told you not to speak,” Jane said in a completely calm voice, as if she hadn’t heard his actual words. “Say one more word before I allow it, and I will hurt Paul. I promise.”

Tick looked back at her. She stared at him, waiting for his response, practically begging him to call her bluff. He fumed, his breathing stilted. Luckily Paul didn’t say anything. Finally, using all of his willpower to show restraint, Tick simply nodded. No more words. No more apologies.

“This first observation room is relatively early in the process,” Jane said, in her tour guide voice, as if she hadn’t just threatened bodily harm to Paul. “The genes and blood and cells haven’t been consumed yet, haven’t been . . . processed. The next room down the hall will show you what these two subjects will look like in about twenty-four hours. On we go.”

She set off walking, her Staff tap-tap-tapping on the stone floor.

Tick followed, hating how she’d called the animals “subjects.” Hating every single thing about this horrible woman.

When the next window came into view up ahead, Jane spoke again, over her shoulder. “I hope you haven’t eaten in awhile. What you’re about to see is amazing and wonderful, but might be a bit disturbing.”

The Miracle of Birth

Sato had wanted to climb the wall himself, but Mothball made it clear that wasn't an option. She said they couldn't risk having their leader shot in the eyeball with an arrow to start things off. Sato grumbled, of course, but in the end he sent up a crew of six Fifths to peek over the top edge. He got back at Mothball by not letting her go, telling her she had to stay by his side as his second in command. When she grumbled as well, he had to hold in a laugh.

"Ready the Ragers and Squeezers!" he yelled when the six tall soldiers—Sato had decided to start calling them that—reached the point where all they had to do was pop their heads up to see the other side.

"Gotcha, Boss," Tollaseat said, his hands full of Ragers. His wife, Windasill, stood next to him, her hands full of the black, wire-filled grenades called Squeezers. Sato had told Mothball's parents they were supposed to stay near him as well, to be used for long-range action like this.

"You guys ready up there?" Sato called out.

Instead of speaking, the three men and three women above simply gave him the thumbs-up, a sign that was evidently universal.

"Okay. Tollaseat and Windasill will throw the cover weapons on my count of three. As soon as you hear the first round of explosions, pop over and climb down as quickly as possible. Start firing those Shurricks, and the rest of us will be right behind you."

Another round of thumbs-up.

"One. Two. Three!"

Mothball's parents brought their hands low then flung them toward the sky, letting go at the right moment to send the weapons flying up and well over the top of the wooden fence and the waiting Fifths. A few seconds later, the clatter of the weapons raining down on the other side was immediately followed by the ripping static thumps of the Ragers exploding. Then came the Squeezers' metallic clanging and sounds of wires whizzing through the air. All muted and distant, but loud enough to be heard clearly.

"Go!" Sato yelled. "Go now!"

The six soldiers were already on the move. They grabbed the very top of the fence and swung their legs over, the bulky Shurricks already gripped in one of their hands, ready to start firing. They disappeared from sight.

Sato started climbing the wall after them. "Go! Go! Come on!" He didn't

need to say it—every last Fifth was already scaling the clunky wood face of the fence.



Just before Sato reached the top, a soldier’s head suddenly popped back over, looking straight down at him. It was a woman, and she had a puzzled look creasing her skinny face.

“What’s the matter?” Sato asked.

“You need to see this,” was her response. She disappeared once again.

Sato clambered up the last few feet to look over the edge. He’d had ideas of what to expect inside—barracks, groups of creatures, large weapons ready to fire, a creepy hospital-looking thing that was the Factory. But he froze in confusion at what he saw below him.

Other than the grove of trees that grew close to the iron gate, there was nothing. Absolutely nothing.

From where he perched on the fence, looking left and right and forward all the way to the other side of the fence—barely visible in the distance—he saw nothing but dirt and mud and a few trees. Not one building, not one creature, not one person other than the soldiers he'd sent over.

Dirt and mud and trees.

Sato turned to Mothball, who was right next to him and looking as bewildered as he felt. "Are we sure we came to the right place?"

~

Tick wanted to look away. Every single cell in his body wanted him to look away. Every notion of normalcy and human decency and right-and-wrong screamed at him to look away—that this wasn't something a boy like him should witness.

But he stared through the window in disbelief that Jane could really be this evil.

The room was identical to the first one—three beds lined up in a triangle, the odd, skin-like bio-tube, and a creepy man in the middle, his back turned, typing away at a computer. As before, the closest bed was empty and the left and right beds had occupants. But that's where the similarities ended and the true horrors began.

Another raven lay on the bed to the left—or what used to be a raven. The poor thing that lay there now barely resembled a living being. It looked like a corpse, its emaciated body sucked dry of fat and water, the feathers gone, yellowed skin clinging to its bones. The bio-tube still grew out of its dead chest toward the ceiling.

Tick turned his attention to the right bed, where a panting wolf lay clinging to life, the other end of the tube shaking with each desperate breath. Most of its black-gray fur had fallen out, littering the bed and the surrounding floor like some kind of haunted barber shop. Diseased skin stretched taut over the dying thing's bones.

And then there was that third bed. Empty. Waiting. For what?

When Jane spoke, Tick flinched, startled. "The needed materials have been fully exhumed from the subjects at this stage. They've been collected, filtered, sorted out, and reconfigured. All done with an intense heightening of the scientific process made possible by our special version of Chi'karda. The sweet sacrifice of these two noble creatures is about to conclude in an even greater achievement than their separate lives could ever have accomplished. And one day we'll be ready to use human subjects. I've already gathered many worthy candidates—children with the spark of Chi'karda strongly within them. Soon the possibilities will be endless."

Tick's hands compacted into tight fists. He felt like the skin might burst, he squeezed them so tightly. Trickle of Chi'karda burned within him. It took

every bit of his willpower not to explode, do whatever it took to kill this insane, evil woman.

“Ah,” she said with an intake of breath, a sick burst full of joy. “It’s just about to happen. Keep watching, keep watching!”

Tick didn’t want to. He wanted to run and hide. But some sense of duty made him stay where he stood, eyes focused, ready. He needed to know the truth—all of it—if he was ever going to stop Jane.

Movement at the top of the room caught his attention. He looked up to see a huge growth blossoming out of what he’d thought was a normal ceiling, but could now see was made up of the same material as the bio-tube. Bulky and bulbous, an orb grew out and downward, swelling until it was only a few feet above the tables, centered around the empty bed closest to Tick. Another growth shot out of the first one, a thick, squat tube that pulsed with life.

This second growth lowered down until it was directly above the empty mattress, then its end split open, pieces of material curling out and away like the petals of a flower. Goey slime dripped out and sloshed across the white sheet, followed by a dark lump of a thing, squirming and kicking out its long legs. Before Tick could get a good look, the monster bounded off the bed and skittered across the floor, disappearing behind a large, boxy computer in the corner.

The man monitoring the situation from the middle of the room moved to chase the creature down, a nasty-looking instrument in his hands with metal rods and sparks of electricity shooting into the air.

Tick couldn’t take it anymore. He turned around and leaned his back against the warm glass window, folding his arms. He pushed away the bubbling flames of Chi’karda in his chest.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Jane said, her mask set to something that looked like a teacher speaking to a student. “That I’m horrible. That I’m evil. That I’m a monster myself.”

“Yeah, you witch,” Paul said. “That’s exactly what we’re thinking.”

Tick tensed, worried Jane would retaliate. But she kept talking. “However, you aren’t blessed with the same perspective that I am blessed with. You don’t share the vision of what the Realities will become. I need these creatures to carry out my orders, to help me defeat my enemies, to help me achieve my purposes. In the end, no one will disagree that it was worth the bumps along the road. That, as they say, the ends justify the means.”

“Bumps along the road?” Tick asked, surprised at how tight his throat felt, how hard it was to get the words out. For now, he had to put aside the shock and disgust of what he’d just seen. “You’re not even worth arguing with anymore. But you promised to hear me out about something. We need to talk, and we need to talk now. Things are gonna get really bad any second.”

“Yes, I know,” Jane said back in a whisper. “I’ve started to sense it. Something is wrong—”

She didn’t finish because the entire tunnel seemed to jump three feet into the air then drop again, throwing the four of them to the ground. The whole place continued to shake, the groans and cracks of shifting rock thundering in the air. The glass of the window shattered, raining pieces down upon Tick, who knew in his gut what was happening.

The Haunce had predicted it: the final devastation and destruction before the Realities ripped apart and ceased to exist forever.

The end had begun.

Holes in the Ground

Sato and the Fifths walked around the flat, muddy ground of the wooden fence's interior, kicking at occasional rocks and looking for anything that might give them a clue as to the purpose of the place.

"Why would they build a huge fence around dirt fields?" Sato asked Mothball, who walked beside him, mumbling about how time was a-wasting.

"Has to be a reason," she answered. "Whoever it is been winkin' us 'round like pinballs must know what they're doin'. We're in the right place, we are. I feel it in me bones. Just need to use them brains of ours."

Sato knelt down and dug in the mud, throwing handfuls to the side. "Maybe your dad was right. Maybe it's all underground, and there's an entrance somewhere in here."

"Can't imagine they'd have to dig their way in every ruddy time," Mothball said, but squatted down to help him. Soon they were a good two feet into the soft earth.

"I know a door wouldn't be under here," Sato said. "But if we hit a hard surface, at least we'll know there's a building underneath."

He glanced up to wipe the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve and stopped. The Fifth Army soldiers had spread out all over the place, following his example by digging in the ground. Sato rolled his eyes and got back to work. These people had gotten a little fanatical in their loyalty to him.

He was all the way to his elbows in greasy mud when the tips of his fingers finally brushed against a rough, hard surface. Spurred by adrenaline, he dug faster, throwing out huge chunks until he had cleared away several square inches of his discovery—a dark stone. Disappointed, he pulled out of the hole and sat back on his haunches.

"What's bitten your buns?" Mothball asked, looking up from her own pathetic excavation.

"I thought I'd found something," he muttered. "Something man-made. But it's just a big, buried rock."

"Must be a mighty big-un then. Looks like I've found me own slice of it." She pointed toward the bottom of her hole.

Sato crawled over to her and looked down at the swath of bumpy, dark rock. His heartbeat picked up its pace. "You think maybe Jane's built something down there made out of this stone? Wouldn't surprise me, now that

I think about it—her castle looks like it was made a thousand years ago. Why would her factory be any different?”

“Want us to keep diggin’ around, do ya?” Mothball asked, eyebrows raised.

Sato got to his feet and cupped his hands around his mouth to shout the order, even though his people were already doing it. His first word didn’t make it out of his mouth before the ground beneath him lurched, throwing him on his back. As he scrambled to regain his feet, the earth continued to shake, knocking him down again. Then again.

“Earthquake!” Mothball roared.

The ground moved and jostled and jumped. The world around Sato looked as if he was viewing it from a shaking camera, his vision blurry and bouncy. He concentrated on the ground directly below him, settling his feet into the mud so he could stand up and figure out what they should do. He balanced himself, holding his hands out as he slowly stood, swaying back and forth to avoid falling.

The soldiers of the Fifth appeared as if they were dancing, leaning to and fro, stumbling this way and that, falling into each other then away again. The quake increased in intensity, shaking everything. Sato couldn’t think of one reasonable order or command to shout. What did you do against Mother Nature?

An earsplitting crack fractured the air, like the sound of an entire mountain shattering. A jagged piece of dark stone erupted from the mud about forty feet in front of Sato, thrusting up from the ground like a primitive knife. One of the Fifths had been standing on the spot, and he rose twice his height into the air before tumbling off, a bloody gash on his left leg.

To Sato’s right, a huge gap in the ground opened up like the yawn of a sleeping giant; several soldiers screamed as they plummeted into the darkness below. More rocky pillars jutted up from the dirt, and more holes appeared out of nowhere, the crack of splitting stone like hammers on nails. All the while, the world shook and trembled. Still, Sato didn’t know what to do. Everything had gone to complete chaos, and he had no idea how to gain back control.

He’d barely noticed Mothball sliding away from him when he felt the ground disappear beneath his own feet. He fell into an abyss, an embarrassing squeal escaping his throat when he landed on top of his tall friend ten feet below. He heard her grunt as she pushed him off. He rolled across dark, wet stone, barely lit by the sky peeking through the long, jagged hole in the roof above them.

Something furry and strong grabbed both of his arms.

He shrieked again as it dragged him into the deeper darkness until he could

see no more.

~

The tunnel was breaking apart, splits and cracks and rocks falling. Everything shook.

Tick had fallen on top of Paul, who grunted and squirmed to push him off. Sofia lay just a few feet from them, not moving. Somehow Jane still stood upright, using her Staff as a brace in one hand. She had her other hand raised, fingers outspread, and Tick realized she was using her powers to create a shield around them, the larger pieces of debris disintegrating before they hit anyone.

“Sofia!” Tick yelled over the sounds of splintering stone. “Are you okay?”

She moved, filling him with relief. When she turned to look at him, trying to smile to show she was okay, he noticed she had a long gash on her forehead—the guilty rock lay right next to her. She must’ve been hit before Jane had created the shield.

“Come on,” Tick said to Paul, grabbing him by the shirt. Losing balance with each movement, they managed to scoot their way to Sofia. Tick looked up at Jane. “This is what I was talking about! The Haunce said we had to work together to stop it!”

They bounced in the tunnel like they’d been thrown down a steep mountainside. Jane’s mask showed no expression.

“Jane!” Tick yelled. “We can’t stay here. We have to get out of here and figure things out!”

“Call me *Mistress*,” she said, but without conviction. Tick wouldn’t have been able to understand the words if he hadn’t heard her say them before. He couldn’t believe she’d worry about such a stupid thing right then.

“Mistress Jane!” he screamed at her.

She seemed to snap out of whatever trance held her, her mask transforming into a look of concern. Her voice boomed as if she used a microphone. “We need to get above ground—to the dirt fields on top of us. Nothing to fall on us there.”

“Then do it!” Tick called back. “How do—”

He cut off when she gripped the Barrier Staff in both hands and thrust it toward the cracked ceiling of the tunnel. Its upper tip slammed into the rock. A bright burst of white fire made Tick shut his eyes and look down. A new sound overwhelmed the cracking and splitting of rock around them: pounding ocean waves and the familiar shifting of sands. He’d heard that noise before—when his own powers had heightened entropy and dissolved matter.

When he sensed that the brilliant light had died down, he looked up. Jane had created a massive hole that led directly to open air and cloudy skies above them. The cavity was round and smooth, as if it had been carved by the

strongest lasers in the world. Before he could fully process it, he saw her grip the Staff in both hands and hold it horizontally, like someone readying for a quarterstaff fight. Then all four of them suddenly shot up from the tunnel, an invisible force lifting them through the gaping hole and into the outside air.

Tick didn't have the time or energy to wonder about how she did it. They flew like the fangen he'd seen at her castle, out of the collapsing rubble underground, across fields of dirt and mud which had pillars and jagged triangles of rock jutting through the surface. She found a safe spot just outside the large wooden fence they'd approached from the forest an hour or so ago. They landed with a soft bump, and the magic ride was over.

"Whoa," Paul said. "We don't even have wings."

Tick thought it was a perfectly absurd thing to say at the moment.

Flies in the Biscuits

Sato squirmed and kicked and twisted his body as the monstrous, furry thing dragged him across the rough stone floor. He couldn't see a single thing, the darkness complete. Scratches and burns lit up his skin like biting flames. Even with the movement, he could tell the place around him still shook from the never-ending earthquake.

He decided to still himself and save up his energy for one concentrated effort to escape from the creature. He calmed his body and legs, trying to relax despite the pain. The thing continued to pull him through the black, cool air. After several seconds, Sato went for it.

He thrust up with his pelvis, at the same time planting both feet and pushing off. Tensing his arms, he twisted his body as violently as he could, trying to flip over onto his stomach. The last gasp effort worked—the creature lost its grip on him and Sato heard it trip and tumble across the stone.

Sato scrambled to his feet and ran toward the sound, knowing that he didn't have time to pull out any weapons, that he'd have only one chance to surprise the monster and attack it. His foot hit a soft lump of something, and Sato pounced, falling on top of the creature. He felt around with his hands, squeezing the thing's body between his legs as it thrashed around, trying to throw him off. Sato felt fur and sweat. Sharp claws grazed across his upper arm, his shoulder.

He found the neck, gripping it with both hands, and squeezed. Eventually, the thing slowed its attempts to escape. And then it stilled completely, one last gurgled gasp of a breath escaping, the smell of it awful and rotten.

Sato fell off the creature, scooting away frantically until his back found a hard wall. He pulled his legs up to his chest and wrapped his arms around his knees as the dark place continued to shake and rattle around him. Rocks and pebbles rained from the ceiling, pelting his head. A sudden urge to quit—to forget all about his army and his promises and all the horrible things that were happening—almost consumed him, almost made him decide to sit there and wait to die.

But he couldn't give in. He pushed his fear away and slammed that door closed.

Trembling, terrified, and blind, deafened by the sounds of cracking rock, Sato somehow got to his feet and started running.

~

Master George had to stop every once in a while and force himself to take deep, pulling breaths. The Control Room was abuzz with alerts and flashing indicator lights. Sato and his army had somehow been scattered, seemingly running around—and, inexplicably, up and down—like hornets with a busted nest.

Rutger came running in from the other room where he was doing his best to monitor TV stations around the world. “It’s all started up again! Earthquakes everywhere. Lightning storms in some places. I don’t know how much longer the networks will be able to keep broadcasting.”

“Dear me, dear me. It’s begun, just like Atticus said it would. At least he and his friends are still together—though they just moved a great distance rather quickly. Not sure how that happened.”

“We’re going to have our own worries,” Rutger said, looking down at the clipboard in his hand, charts and graphs filling the first page.

Master George groaned, not needing yet another fly in his biscuit. “What is it, Rutger?”

“All these quakes are gonna send a tidal wave right down on top of us.”

~

The muddy ground rumbled and grumbled around Tick and his friends. The trees of the forest were only a hundred feet away and shook like grasses caught in a wind. Every few seconds a loud crack filled the air as the wooden fence split from the raging quake.

At least nothing was falling on them from above.

Tick got to his feet, wobbling back and forth. The deep mud around his shoes actually helped him keep an uneasy balance. Jane stood nearby, her face blank, swaying with the earth’s movements as she grasped her Staff with both hands. Tick decided to get it all out in a rush, leaving her no time to talk back until he was finished.

“Ja—” He stopped himself. “*Mistress* Jane. The Haunce is supposed to come here any moment. Then we all have to work together to somehow fix whatever it is you did to the Realities. If we don’t, everything’s gonna be destroyed, and every single person in every single Reality is going to die. So we need to make a deal—we need to put aside our fight and do what the Haunce wants us to do.”

She didn’t respond, only stared at him with those black holes she called eyes.

“Are you even listening to me?” he yelled, unable to restrain himself. “*You* did this! Now we have to make it better, make it go away. What good is it to you if we all—”

“Don’t insult me, you stupid child!” she screamed back at him, her face

transforming to anger so quickly that Tick didn't see the usual flow of red metal. "I'm fully aware of what's going on. Of course I'm going to do whatever it takes to fix it. You think I'd be foolish enough to jeopardize my plans over something so . . . human as pride? Now stop your arrogant spouting, and let's get on with it. Where is the Haunce? Where are we supposed to meet that big cloud of electrical waste?"

Her insults and tone didn't faze Tick in the least. "I don't know. It just said I needed to come here and convince you to help. We had to meet here because for some reason, the Chi'karda is stronger here than anywhere else."

"Of course." A particularly strong bounce in the ground made her stumble backward. "That's why I built the Factory here. And why I'm able to do the miraculous things you just saw."

Tick just happened to look at Sofia as she rolled her eyes, then literally bit her lip to keep from saying something smart. As for him, he didn't know what to do. He'd come to the right place; he'd convinced Jane she needed to help. What now?

A few minutes passed. No one spoke, only observed the world shaking and cracking all around them. Tick didn't know when exactly he'd dropped to his knees on the ground, but having the lower half of his legs firmly entrenched in mud sure helped his balance. His thoughts drifted to his family, to his Reality, to what horrible things must be happening there and the terror the people he cared about must be feeling.

Before his heart completely melted into a pool of pity and anguish, he snapped his mind away from it all. None of it mattered. Nothing mattered unless he got the job done right here, right now.

A stiff wind picked up out of nowhere, blowing swirls all around them, pulling at their clothes and hair. Tick squinted his eyes against the flying grit. A few jagged streaks of electricity abruptly knifed through the air in a spot just a few yards away from the group. The thin lightning bolts fired back and forth, collapsing in on each other as if they were trapped inside an invisible sphere. Then it all collapsed into a blinding ball of whiteness, hovering above the ground.

Tick looked away, a big bright spot in his vision. He heard a loud thrum of energy combined with the snaps of popping static. Surges of that now-familiar womping Chi'karda washed over his body in waves of tingles and vibrations. When he finally blinked his vision back to normal and returned his gaze to the spot, the glowing silver-blue orb of the Haunce floated there, its many faces alternating rapidly.

It spoke in a deep and resonating voice, its face changing from an old, wrinkled woman to a young boy as it did so. "It is far worse than we feared. Millions are dead already. Come, hurry. In thirty minutes, the universe will no

longer exist.”

Creatures in the Dark

Screams up ahead. Some human, but most unnatural, almost demonic. Explosions. Thumps of sound more felt than heard. Ragers and Shurricks, most likely.

Encouraged, Sato moved toward it all, keeping his right shoulder close to the rock wall, doing his best not to fall down at every lurch of the earthquake. The air had brightened slightly, but he still could barely see. Here he was supposed to be leading a great army in their very first battle, and he'd somehow ended up all by himself, nowhere near the action. He would've felt guilty if he had the time or energy to worry about such things.

Rapid footsteps approached, accompanied by grunts and gurgly breathing. It sounded like a whole pack of Jane's creations coming straight for him. Sato reached into his pockets and pulled out a Squeezer grenade in one hand, a Rager in the other. He crouched down and backed into a natural alcove in the stone, hoping not to have to use the weapons until the monsters were past him, hoping they wouldn't notice him.

His wish came true—mostly. At least thirty creatures ran by in a storm of heavy footfalls and flying sweat. Sato could see only their outlines: hunchbacked wolves walking on their hind legs. He shuddered and had to fight not to close his eyes and act like a little kid wishing they were just nightmares that would go away.

The last one of the group stopped as its companions kept moving. Sato held his breath and tried to shrink into the stone at his back. The odd creature sniffed several times and pivoted its muzzled head back and forth. Sniffed again. And again.

Sato didn't move, only tightened his fingers around the grenade, ready to throw it directly at the monster's chest and run if it came to that. The creature took a step toward him, then another. Sniffed again. Made a low, wet, rattling sound somewhere deep in its throat. Another sniff. Sato could see its outline plainly; it was just a few feet away. He could only hope the thing had poor eyesight or wasn't expecting something huddled near the ground.

It took another step toward him, sniffed, and let out its growl again.

A sharp barking sound rang out from where its companions had gone. The creature in front of Sato barked back—a horrible, horrible sound—before it turned in a slow circle, giving the area one last look, sniffing again and again.

It took two slow steps away from Sato then turned and ran after the others.

When the monstrous thing had finally been swallowed by the inky gloom of the tunnel, Sato got back to his feet and threw the two projectiles as hard as he could after it. He didn't wait to see the result, but sprinted in the near-darkness in the opposite direction, toward the still-clanging sounds of battle. A few seconds passed before he heard the Squeezer's boom and the clatter of flying wires behind him, followed by the electric-tinged explosion of the Rager. Inhuman screams pierced the air, flying through the tunnel like a wind full of death.

Sato kept running.

~

The Haunce obviously didn't think there was any time for manners.

"We need to get rid of the boy and girl. We do not need them." Its eyes—set in the face of a middle-aged man with a huge nose—darted at Paul and Sofia. "And if they stand too close to us when we begin, they will explode."

Nervous pangs, almost painful, bit and poked at Tick's insides. Luckily, his friends didn't seem to think they should argue the point.

"So what do we do?" Paul asked, kneeling on the ground on all fours struggling to keep his balance.

Tick had an idea. "Master George!" he yelled as loud as his sore throat would allow. "If you somehow made it back to headquarters, wink Paul and Sofia back!"

"Wait!" Sofia snapped. "We should stay here, go find Sato. Help him rescue all those—"

Too late. She and Paul disappeared.

~

"—kids!" Sofia barely got the word out before she collapsed to the hard metal floor of Master George's headquarters in the Bermuda Triangle. Going from an earthquake to the steady surface totally threw her off-balance.

"Whoa! Hey!" This from Paul. "How'd you do that so fast?"

She looked at him kneeling next to her, mud caked all over his pants, then up at a grinning Rutger. "Yeah, how did you know what Tick was saying?"

Rutger looked like a proud parent. "You kids still have a lot to learn. I was monitoring your nanolocators more closely than anyone else's, and we can pick up the vibrations in your larynx when you speak. How do you think we kept such good tabs on you when you were being recruited?"

"You guys seriously creep me out sometimes," Paul said. He got to his feet and wiped at the mud on his clothes. He held out his hands, a disgusted look on his face. "Don't you think we deserve some privacy?"

Rutger scoffed at him. "We only monitor in emergencies. Now quit your

boo-hooing and come with me to see Master George in the Control Room. We have some serious problems.”

Why didn't Sofia feel in the least bit surprised?

~

As soon as his friends vanished, Tick made his way closer to the Haunce, stumbling left and right through the mud. The cracks of the nearby wooden fence splitting and tumbling filled the air.

Jane lifted off the ground and floated the few feet over to their visitor, landing with a squish in the soft earth just as Tick reached a spot right next to her. They both turned their attention to the Haunce.

The ghostly creature showed the face of a young Asian boy. “We know the two of you are bitter enemies. We have observed you both from afar with the utmost interest. Your base and childish actions have disappointed us many, many times. We know that in your hearts, you both want to kill the other.” Its face morphed into a pretty lady as it paused.

Tick, shocked by this odd opening statement, looked at Jane, but she didn't return his gaze, her mask blank, her eyes focused on the Haunce. Tick glanced back at the silvery glowing face, now an old man. “Yeah, you pretty much nailed that one.”

The Haunce's voice rose in volume, sounding almost excited. “It is time to put that aside. We cannot let trivial matters interfere with what we are about to do. Your hatred, your anger, your ill-fated desires—they must disappear. Now. Do you both understand?”

Tick nodded, though he couldn't imagine actually accomplishing such a thing. He hated the woman next to him more than he'd ever known it was possible to hate. But he did try to slide those thoughts and feelings behind the angst of what was now more important. He would do whatever the Haunce told him to do.

The Haunce's eyes focused on Jane, waiting. Tick noticed in his peripheral vision that she gave a very slow but obvious nod. Just once.

“We can only hope,” the Haunce said through the lips of a hideously ugly man, “that after this experience—if we succeed—you and the rest of the living will remember how close you came to never living again. That you will learn how to live appropriately. That you will learn to see life as the gift that it is.”

Tick couldn't help but feel a deluge of impatience. Now didn't seem like the best time for a lecture from a big, fat ghost. They needed to get on with it!

The Haunce's current face trembled, its eyes narrowing as if it had realized the same thing and was refocusing on the task at hand. “The minutes are ticking away. It is time to begin. What you are about to experience will feel very . . . odd.”

Tick swallowed the giant lump in his throat. He felt such a powerful swell of nervousness in his chest, he thought for sure his heart had been crushed. But then the Haunce turned into a face that looked so much like his mom he almost fell backward. The lady smiled, and the smallest trickle of peace washed through Tick's insides.

It didn't last long. A blinding white light came from everywhere at once, the mud and forest and fence and blue sky swallowed by its brilliance. A loud buzzing sound filled his ears.

And then he felt himself explode.

Eternity

Sato was thankful for the growing light as he ran through the tunnels, sick of that terrified feeling of blindness in the dark. But it was greatly tempered by the increasing sounds of horror from up ahead. Screeches, mostly from creatures he knew couldn't be human. Cries of pain from those that were. Explosions and cracking rock.

When he turned a corner and saw the full spectrum of battle in front of him, he couldn't help but stop. He stared at the scene, having second thoughts about his self-imposed calling for the hundredth time that day.

A massive chamber that looked to have once been some sort of underground atrium for Jane's Factory now looked like a tornado had touched down. Chunks of earth and stone littered the floor, some taller than a grown man. Patches of open sky broke up what had once been a painted ceiling—murals of Bible stories and famous moments from history. In his quick scan he noticed half of Noah's ark and a scene of Abraham Lincoln sitting in the theater where he had been shot.

On the floor, dozens of Fifths fought a variety of Jane's creations, outnumbered twenty to one. At least. But the advanced weapons of the Realitants seemed to even the score. Still, he saw with a pang to his heart that several of the tall soldiers lay dying or dead.

Squeezer grenades exploded on the left and right, downing a whole slew of hairy, fanged beasts, all of whom fell to the ground squealing and squirming from the attacking wires. One of the Fifths shot her Halter tube, sending a spray of darts that immediately paralyzed five or six four-legged things with wings flapping their way through one of the holes in the ceiling; they plummeted to the ground and crashed with a sickening crunch. Thumps from Shurrics pummeled the air like the beating of silent drums. Every time a shot hit its mark, a creature went flying until it smashed into a wall.

Sato watched the battle with an odd mixture of feelings—guilt that he wasn't out there, an urge to run and join them, terror at the thought of doing so, pride that his little army fought so strongly and bravely—were maybe even winning. Mostly though, it reminded him of what horrible things Jane was doing here by using innocent animals to create those hideous beasts—and soon she would be using children.

He knew what he had to do. He knew his place. There'd be plenty of time

in the days and years ahead to lead men and women into battle. But for now, he had to leave the very capable Fifth Army to the fight. He had to find those kids. He had to find them and save them.

He was about to turn around and start searching the complex when Mothball appeared out of the fray, running straight toward him. She pulled up, sucking in huge gulps of air. Then she patted a bulge in the side of her shirt.

“Been . . . waitin’ on ya . . . I ’ave,” she spit out between breaths. “Got a whole . . . mess of them . . . nanolocators in me pocket.”

She didn’t have to say another word. Sato was grateful for the help.

“Let’s go,” he said.

~

Tick floated in emptiness in a realm he didn’t understand.

He hadn’t felt any pain when his body erupted into billions of tiny parts. It had been more like a wash of tingles spreading across a warm, glowing sensation. Really pleasurable, actually. But now a sense of panic set in as his mind tried to comprehend the impossible thing that had just happened to him.

He could barely articulate within his own thoughts what his five senses were experiencing. He saw spinning lights, orange globes, streaks of blue and silver—all on a canvas of the deepest black he’d ever seen. It was like he floated in the depths of unexplored outer space. That same buzzing sound surrounded him, mixed with something that reminded him of waterfalls. The air had a slightly burnt odor to it. Without understanding how he knew, he realized that he didn’t exist in his usual human form anymore. He had become . . . part of the things that he witnessed around him.

And yet he was still Tick. Still had the cognitive functions of his brain. Still kid enough to simultaneously think this was really cool and also really scary.

The Haunce spoke, and its booming voice made those peripheral sounds dampened and dull. Tick couldn’t see the collection of ghosts—just heard it with ears he didn’t have at the moment.

“Atticus. Jane. Nothing we could have said beforehand could have prepared you for what we have done to you. For that reason, we said nothing. With time running out, we must begin our attempt to rebind the barriers of the Realities, to seal up the cracking splits and seams, to make the universe whole again. In the end, we promise we will do everything in our power to return you to your prior forms.”

Tick didn’t like the sound of that. If they succeeded, there must be a chance he’d never make it back to what he’d had before. Maybe he’d have to float here for the rest of his life.

“Where are we?” he asked, though he had no idea how he did it with no tongue and no mouth, no audible words. It was more like he’d projected his

thoughts. “And what did you do to us. What are we right now?”

“Yes.” It was Jane’s voice, but not her voice. “I think we deserve to know what we’ve volunteered for.”

When the Haunce spoke again, Tick heard real emotion in its voice for the first time: impatience. “We have mere minutes, do you understand? It would take us a hundred lifetimes to explain the complexities of what and who and where you are right now. You are in the depths of space, in the smallest of smallest quantum realms, on the infinite path, in the past, present, and future. All at once. You are a trillion miles long and an atom’s width short. You are here and there and everywhere. You are, quite simply, joined with eternity. One day you will understand. Perhaps. But for now, you must do what we say, or everyone and everything will die!”

Tick listened in awe, hoping Jane would shut up and do the same.

The Haunce continued, sounding a little nicer. “The true power of Chi’karda lies not in scientific formulas and complicated theorems and atomic mapping. No. It lies within the heart and mind and spirit. It lies in the power of the soulikens. The two of you have more Chi’karda concentrated within you than any two humans we have ever observed. Far more. We still do not understand why this is so with Jane. Atticus, you have it because every one of your Alterants has died, and their soulikens have transferred to you. Why that happened, we do not know for sure.”

If Tick’s face had existed, he would’ve scrunched it up in confusion. But he remained quiet.

Jane didn’t. “I thought you said we had no time to waste.”

“Silence! Every word we speak is vital. You need to know that the Chi’karda is magnificently potent and powerful within both of you. Almost violently so. You must know this so you will have the confidence that the task you are about to perform will indeed accomplish our mutual goal of saving the Realities. Do not try to understand how or why. The breakdown of the intricate and infinitely complex background of it is for us to worry about. The two of you will use your powers in a way that your minds best decide to present it to you symbolically.”

The Haunce paused then, maybe to let its words sink in. Tick didn’t quite understand—not at all, actually—but he knew better than to resort to any childish antics when everything was on the line. He’d only move forward and do what he was asked to do.

“The two most powerful and effective things in the universe are the human mind and Chi’karda,” the Haunce continued. “They will now work together within you to present what we need in a way you will best understand it. Trust your instincts and accomplish the task. That is all. By doing so, you will put the pieces in place to heal the breaches in the Barriers. No matter what, trust

what you see. No matter what, do what is asked of you. No matter what. Do you both understand?"

Tick's first instinct was to nod, but nothing moved because there wasn't anything to move. So he verbalized again. "Yeah. Yes. I understand."

"Jane?"

She didn't answer until a few seconds passed, probably trying to save a little face, a little power. "Yes. I understand."

"Then let the process begin," the Haunce pronounced.

Words on a Tree

Again, Tick could never have explained to anyone what happened next. The swirling lights and glowing orbs and colored streaks suddenly twisted around him like a pyrotechnic tornado, spinning and spinning until he wished he could close his eyes or look away. Dizziness filled him, those pleasurable feelings of floating and tingles and warmth gone in an instant.

Everything blended into one bright, all-encompassing light around him, joined by a rushing sound of wind and roaring trains. Tick felt a pressure, small at first then building, as if his parts had been thrown into a compressor and were being squeezed back together. It had just started to hurt when it all stopped, instantly. The light, the sounds, the heavy force.

He felt nothing. He saw only darkness.

Then things began to change.

One by one, his senses picked up new impressions. He heard a soft wind blowing through the branches of trees. Cold prickled his skin as he suddenly felt that same cool breeze, felt the crisp air all around him. The strong smell of pine trees filled his nose as he pulled in a deep breath. He licked his lips, tasted salt. The bottom of his feet pressed against something—he was standing—and they were cold, too.

Wind. Nose. Lips. Feet.

Tick had been put back together. But why the darkness?

Idiot, he chastised himself. His eyes were closed.

He opened them and took in another burst of quick breath.

A forest surrounded him, a thick layer of freshly fallen snow making the whole place a winter wonderland. Huge trees—mostly pine—towered above him, their branches heavily laden with the puffy white stuff. Tick glanced down to see his feet buried clear up to the ankles. Some of the snow had melted, and his socks were wet, his toes beginning to freeze.

He looked around at the tightly packed trees that went on in every direction as far as he could see. He slowly turned in a circle, taking it all in. The place was beautiful and reminded him of the woods near his home in Washington, though this forest seemed even larger and more widespread.

He'd turned about ninety degrees when he noticed a piece of paper stapled to a thick oak tree just a few feet away. The paper didn't seem wet at all,

which meant someone had to have put it there recently, and several lines had been written on its surface. Curious, he stepped forward, slogging through the snow until he reached the mysterious note, now only inches from his eyes.

He began to read but didn't get very far before he knew exactly what it was.

A riddle.

~

Mothball's flashlight unfurled a spooky path in front of them.

Sato felt like he'd been soldiering with her for years. They slunk their way through the still-shaking tunnels and hallways of the Factory like old pros, anticipating each other's movements as they tried to use their four eyeballs to look in every direction for potential enemies. So far it seemed as if all of Jane's creatures had congregated at the main battle.

Shurrics cocked and gripped in their hands, they searched and searched. They had to find where these monsters kept the kids.

When they reached a T, Mothball shone her flashlight both directions.

Sato asked, "Left or right?"

She didn't answer, but instead held a finger up to her lips to shush him.

Sato nodded slightly and listened. The faintest sound floated through the cracking and roaring of shifting stone around them. He strained his ears to hear it, even closed his eyes for a second. A whimper. A cry. Moaning. Sobbing. After a few seconds, the sound cut off abruptly with a terror-filled shriek. Then silence.

Sato met Mothball's dark gaze. "That way for sure."

They went to the left.

~

Sofia sat next to Rutger, fascinated by all the blips and numbers and graphs and charts and squiggly lines on the computer screens. She didn't know what all of it meant yet, and Rutger didn't seem too keen on teaching her with everything that was going on.

"Okay," he said. "I hope this doesn't offend you, Sofia, but what I really need most from you is to run messages back and forth between me and Master George in the Control Room."

It took all of her power not to growl at him like a wolf. No time for wounded pride. "Why don't you have all this junk in the same place?"

Rutger snickered like she'd told a joke. "It used to fit," was all he said.

"At least tell me what you're doing and what he's doing."

Rutger waved his chubby little hand in the air; Sofia had no idea why.

"He's in charge of organizing the rescue of the kids at the Factory. The Barrier Wand's hooked in and set up to wink the nanolocators from the

patches we gave Sato and his army. Sally, Priscilla, and a few other Realitants have set up shop in the Grand Canyon. That's where the kids will be winked to. Not enough room here."

"And your job?" she asked.

"Two main things. We're tracking Tick and Mothball and Sato and his army. I'm also tapped into the meteorological reports and ocean monitoring stations. I don't think there's any doubt—we're going to get hit by a massive tidal wave from one of these earthquakes. Not if, when."

Sofia had been studying the screens as he spoke, and her eyes finally focused in on something she should've noticed from the very first. Sato and Mothball and the others had lots of information scrolling and blinking beneath their names. But not Tick.

His screen was blank from top to bottom. Nothing but black space.

She pointed at it. "What's up with Tick?"

Rutger let out a long and dramatic sigh. "Well, Master George says he expected something like this, but it still makes my feet all itchy."

Sofia felt something shrivel inside her. "What do you mean? What's wrong?"

"According to this, Tick's nanolocator is dead."

~

Tick couldn't believe it. A riddle.

Now he understood what the Haunce had meant when it said that somehow the healing of the Barriers would be presented to each of them in a form that would seem familiar. Symbolically. Tick thought it was almost like a video game—solving the riddle would be like maneuvering the joystick and pushing buttons on the controller, the complex processes and codes and circuits translating those movements into what he saw on the TV screen.

A riddle.

If anything had defined his journey so far as a Realitant, it had to be riddles.

And here he had another one. A doozy.

Concentrating, he read through it one more time:

Look at the following most carefully, as every line counts:

Be gone in times of death's long passing.

Henry Atwood sliced his neck.

Hath reeds knocked against thee?

If our fathers knew, then winds, they blew.

The sixth of candles burned my eyes.

Horrors even among us.

Leigh tries to eat a stone.

The canine or the cat, it spat.

Pay attention to the ghoul that weeps.

Your number's up, and it is missing. Wary the word second.

Shout out your answer.

A new line suddenly appeared at the very bottom of the page, the space blank one second, then filled with several words the next:

The universe ends in 11:58

And then, as impossible as it seemed, the written time at the end of the sentence started changing, ticking down like a digital clock.

11:57

11:56

11:55

11:54

Tick already had the riddle memorized. He closed his eyes and started thinking.

An Unearthly Shriek

Sato heard more of the chilling sound bites over the now all-too-present quaking noises as he and Mothball stumbled their way down the tunnel and closer to a light source up ahead. Sato heard whimpers and cries for help—all of them the high-pitched voices of children. Anger stirred within him, almost completely obliterating the fear and trepidation he'd been feeling. And all the while, the threat of the entire Factory collapsing on top of them loomed over their heads—literally.

They came to a stony bend where the light grew stronger. Mothball stopped and crouched on the shaky ground right at the edge, her head just a few inches below Sato's. He leaned against the wall beside her, his gut telling him they were on the cusp now of discovering the true horror of this place. He sensed the fear around the corner, as if the kids' tears and sweat evaporated into a noxious cloud that poured through the opening he couldn't see.

Mothball dared a peek. "Gotta be it," she whispered. "Monster or two just 'round the corner, guardin' a door. Lug a Squeezer, we should."

Sato reached into his pocket and pulled out one of the small grenades in answer. "I'll throw it. Soon as it pops, let's charge in shooting the Shurricks."

Mothball nodded then returned her attention forward, gripping the Shurrick firmly, its business end pointed away, ready to shoot. Sato stepped away from the wall so he could have the right angle, then tossed the Squeezer around the corner.

It bounced off the far wall then hit the floor with a clang, disappearing from sight as it bounced forward. Seconds later it exploded, sending out a spray of small metal rods. Many of them clinked against the stone, but a few found their marks with a deadly thud. Two or three creatures howled an unearthly shriek.

"Go!" Sato yelled.

He moved to run around the corner, keeping Mothball to his right. He was about to pull the trigger of his Shurrick when he saw two bear-like creatures sprawled on the ground, unmoving. A small lamp stood on a table, its glass broken in two places but still lit. Two chairs had toppled over, along with the guards.

Sato looked at the wooden door they'd been guarding. "A Rager ought to —"

Heavy thumps from Mothball's Shurric cut him off, like invisible lightning and soundless thunder—felt, more than heard. On her third shot, the door exploded with a spray of splinters, flying away from them several feet before falling into some kind of abyss. Sato waited and watched, but he never heard the wooden shards hit anything below.

He exchanged a puzzled look with Mothball then warily crept toward the gaping doorway—he didn't want a sudden uptick in the never-ending quake's strength to send him over the edge—his Shurric armed and ready. He reached the threshold of the door and saw that the other side had no floor, only a sheer drop-off with no bottom in sight as far as he could tell. He slowly leaned his head out to get a better look.

They'd reached a vast, round chamber, at least one hundred feet in diameter, that tunneled toward the depths below, narrowing into a hole of blackness far, far down. Along the walls of the chamber were countless rectangular compartments, alcoves set deeper into the stone and open-faced. Inside those compartments were filthy mattresses with thin, ratty blankets. And on top of those nasty beds lay the most terrified-looking children Sato had ever seen.

~

“Oh, no.”

Rutger hadn't spoken in awhile, and Sofia realized she'd kind of fallen into a daze, worried about Tick and what it meant that his nanolocator had died. And why Master George seemed to think that was okay, or at least expected.

“What's wrong?” she asked.

Rutger turned away from the busy computer screens, scratching his nose as he stared at the floor. “It's a big one. A really big one.”

“What is?” Sofia insisted, almost reaching out and shaking his shoulders.

Rutger looked at her, the usual sparkle in his eyes gone. “A massive tidal wave. Bigger than anything I've ever heard of. It's completely destroyed several monitoring stations. And I know enough to see it's gonna hit us dead on!”

Sofia choked on several attempts to ask the obvious questions, but finally managed to speak. “When? How long?”

“Thirty minutes.”

~

7:32

7:31

7:30

7:29

Tick had given up on the closed-eyes thinking bit. It wasn't working. Not at all. The lines of the riddle didn't make any sense whatsoever. None.

Something told him there was a visual aspect to it. Something in the first and last line appeared to be instructional, not part of the riddle itself. He forced himself to pretend he didn't have it memorized and read it from beginning to end once again.

Look at the following most carefully, as every line counts:

Be gone in times of death's long passing.

Henry Atwood sliced his neck.

Hath reeds knocked against thee?

If our fathers knew, then winds, they blew.

The sixth of candles burned my eyes.

Horrors even among us.

Leigh tries to eat a stone.

The canine or the cat, it spat.

Pay attention to the ghoul that weeps.

Your number's up, and it is missing. Wary the word second.

Shout out your answer.

5:47

5:46

5:45

5:44

His mind continued churning, pressing, scrambling, processing. There was definitely something visual about the riddle.

Look carefully.

Every line counts.

Your number's up. It is missing. The word second.

Look. Line. Counts. Number. Missing. Second.

His thoughts honed in on those six words. Somehow he knew they meant everything.

~

There were a lot of things Sato didn't understand as he stood on that dangerous ledge, staring at the curved walls of cubbyholes filled with children. He had questions aplenty. Like why they were kept in such an odd location, why there weren't any ladders, how the children were used in the first place, where they came from. Plenty of things to wonder and ponder and feel disgust over.

But with the whole Factory shaking and ready to collapse at any second, there was only one thing that mattered: getting the nanolocator patches on every kid in sight.

"Divvy them up," he told Mothball, holding out his hand. "We don't have much time."

"Got no ladders or steps," she replied as she put a huge handful of the patches into his hand. "Got no rope. Whatcha ruddy thinkin' we'll do, fly around like birdies to save 'em?"

Sato slipped the square pieces of paper into his pocket and gave her a glare so hard that she took a full step backward. He was instantly filled with shame, but he said what he felt anyway. "Yes, Mothball. We'll fly if that's what we have to do."

Without waiting for a response, he turned until his back was to the abyss behind him, his toes balanced on the former threshold of the door. He crouched down, then let himself slip over the edge.

What Is Missing

Sato put his hands out, letting the pads of his fingers and palms scrape along the surface of the stone wall as he fell. He focused his concentration so he would be ready for the first opportunity to grab onto something. Fighting off the terrifying panic, he felt as if each nanosecond seemed to beat out a long rhythm.

Bumps and cracks and knobs of rock tore at his skin, but his attempts to grip them proved worthless. The dark surface of the wall suddenly lightened, and he found himself staring into one of the rectangle cubbyholes at a small boy curled up into a ball on his ragged mattress, shaking from the earthquake or bodily ills, or both.

Sato threw his arms forward, hitting the lower floor of the compartment with a terrible bite of pain. His downward movement slammed to a momentary stop, but then he was slipping again, desperately grasping with his fingers for anything to hold onto. A curl of loose blanket, a moist wrinkle of mattress—gone as soon as he touched them. He was just about to fall completely away when his right foot landed on a jutting outcrop of rock; a jolt shivered through every nerve.

Crying out from the pain and shock of his sudden stop, he was still able to take advantage of the moment and adjust his grip on the lower flat edge of stone with his arms. Breathing heavily, Sato couldn't help but pause to make sure it was really true—that he'd really stopped himself from plummeting to his death far below. Hanging there, he looked up to see Mothball looking down on him from twenty feet above.

"A might risky that was," she called out, though a huge smile draped her homely face. Before he could respond, she reared back and took a giant leap to the side, sliding down the stone face as he had done until she caught the next compartment over—with a lot more grace and fewer bruises and scratches, no doubt.

"You think we can do this?" Sato asked, climbing up into the inset hole. The chamber still shook around him, but he'd almost gotten used to it, his body adapting to its movements.

"Like ya said," Mothball responded. "We'll ruddy fly if we have to."

Sato scooted close to the boy sitting there, his arms wrapped around his knees, his eyes filled with a hope that almost broke Sato's heart. The boy

wore a dirty shirt and shorts, his hair messed and greasy.

“You okay?” Sato asked. “We’re here to take you away. Save you.”

The boy didn’t answer, but the slightest hint of a smile graced his face.

“This is gonna surprise you, but in a few seconds you’ll be far away from here.” Sato took one of the nanolocator patches out of his pocket and slapped it on the boy’s bare leg.

An instant later, the kid disappeared.

~

1:45

1:44

1:43

1:42

Tick couldn’t help but stare at the dwindling time as it ticked toward the annihilation of the entire universe. His mind wanted him to waste his brain power wondering how all of time and eternity could be dependent on him solving a stupid riddle. He pushed the question away again and again. Pushed away thoughts of what Jane and the Haunce were doing and whether his efforts would matter anyway.

1:21

1:20

“Stop it, Tick!” he yelled to the empty forest. “Think!”

The answer floated just outside his sphere of concentration. He was almost there.

Every line counts.

Counts.

Nine sentences that made no sense at all or seemed to be related to each other in any way.

Number’s up.

Number.

0:46

0:45

Sweat soaked his forehead, his armpits, his hands. The cold air did nothing to help.

0:40

0:39

Wary the word second.

Second.

Second word.

0:31

0:30

It all came together so instantly, so unexpectedly, that he felt a lump explode in his throat, racking him with a coughing fit. As he hacked the air through his sore throat, he focused on the words of the riddle. His eyes played tricks, making the answer appear as if the letters themselves had magically changed to help him out. He finally quit coughing and couldn't believe now that he hadn't seen it all from the very beginning:

Look at the following most carefully, as every line counts:

Be gone in times of death's long passing.

Henry Atwood sliced his neck.

Hath reeds knocked against thee?

If our fathers knew, then winds, they blew.

The sixth of candles burned my eyes.

Horrors even among us.

Leigh tries to eat a stone.

The canine or the cat, it spat.

Pay attention to the ghoul that weeps.

Your number's up, and it is missing. Wary the word second. Shout out your answer.

0:10

0:09

The second word of each sentence contained at least part of the numbers

he was supposed to look for. To count. And yes, a number was missing.

0:04

0:03

Tick sucked in a quick breath of air then screamed as loudly as possible.

“Five! The answer is five!”

The forest around him sucked away into blackness as once again he exploded into trillions of pieces.

From Bad to Worse

Sofia followed Rutger into the main Control Room, where Master George was waving his arms like the conductor of the world's largest symphony. Despite all their troubles crashing down at once, a small snicker escaped Sofia. She quickly coughed to cover it up, but Paul—sitting nearby with worry on his face—noticed and broke a half-smile that looked more like a wince.

“George!” Rutger barked. “Most of the earthquakes have stopped, but it’s too late for that wave. It’s gonna be here in fifteen minutes!”

Their leader shot them a quick glance then returned his gaze to the rapidly blinking screens in front of him. “My heart can barely stand this confounded predicament!”

“What’s the latest with Sato?” Rutger asked as he and Sofia moved closer.

Master George pointed to a series of purple lines that kept appearing then disappearing. Unlike the indicators for Sato and Mothball above them, these had no names attached. “They’re doing it. They’re doing it! We’ve already winked ten children to the Grand Canyon, where Priscilla and Sally have several doctors on hand.”

Rutger let out a sigh that sounded like he’d lost every ounce of hope. “We won’t survive it,” he said in a tight whisper.

“What’s that?” Master George asked, finally giving his full attention to his partner.

“The wave. There’s no way we can survive it. It’s too big. We . . .” Rutger looked at the floor.

“What? Spit it out, man!”

“We have to leave. This location—and us with it—has zero chance of making it through the wave’s power. It’ll rip our cabling technology to shreds, then pick us up and slam us into shore. We have to leave.”

Sofia felt that shrinking sensation in her gut again. She half-expected Master George to argue, to say it would be okay, maybe express disbelief or babble about how life’s unfair. Instead, he accepted the truth and immediately moved to what needed to be done. Sofia was impressed.

“Then we can only hope they reach every child in time—we don’t have things properly set up at the Grand Canyon to wink them in from that location. We’ll wait here, monitoring the situation and managing the

nanolocator patches. At least we have a bit of good news—if the earthquakes have stopped, then Atticus and Jane must’ve done their job.”

Sofia’s heart lifted, but then she remembered their own problem. “What about the wave?” she asked, her eyes meeting Paul’s, sharing a look that said so much with no need for words.

Master George puffed his chest out and folded his hands on his belly. “The four of us will wink away the second before it hits. It’s time for us to be very brave.”

~

Tick found himself back in that outer-space-like void of lights and streaks and glowing, brilliant orbs. He couldn’t feel his body, didn’t understand what or where or anything else. But he knew they’d done it even before the Haunce spoke to them.

“Through your efforts and power, we have healed the Barriers of the Realities. We will send you back now. Your worlds are not destroyed, but they have still seen great, great devastation. The healing of such things does not rest in our hands. We say farewell.”

The universe spun. Everything changed, and Tick felt the pressure of crushing diamonds.

~

Sato put everything out of his mind. The fear. The soreness of his entire body. His hunger, his exhaustion. From somewhere deep in his cells and molecules and tissue, he sucked out the adrenaline he needed to keep moving.

From one inset compartment to the next, he jumped. They were about four feet apart side to side, a little less up and down. Each and every time, for one frightening second, he thought he wouldn’t make it and instead would plummet to the unseen depths far below. But so far he’d landed each and every time, gripping and pushing and pulling, squirming his way to the children without falling to his death. Mothball was doing the same, working the other side of the stony, rounded chamber.

He spared a glance for the latest kid he’d found—a shaky, pale girl whose eyes were open and focused on his. “Don’t worry,” he said. “We’re here to rescue you.” He’d always wanted to say that to someone.

He slapped a nanolocator patch on her arm, no longer waiting to watch as the kids vanished from sight, winked away by Master George. Already on the move, he crouched on the far end, ready to leap for the next hole, when he noticed two things at the same time that made him pause.

One, the shaking and quaking had stopped completely.

And two, he heard the distant sounds of flapping wings and a chattering, cackling chorus of grunts and squeals coming from below. He looked down.

Several fangen—those horrible creations of Jane’s they’d fought at her

castle when George sent them to steal her Barrier Wand—were flying through the murky darkness, coming up toward him.

Sato jumped to the next compartment.

~

Tick blinked, dazzled by the light of the sun directly overhead. He stood in the mud just outside the broken and jumbled heap of wood that had once been the fence

surrounding the Factory. Mistress Jane stood right in front of him, her expressionless red mask only inches from his face.

For the briefest of moments, he forgot that she was his bitter, bitter enemy.

“I can’t believe we did it,” he said, not ashamed of the childlike wonder in his voice. They had, after all, just saved the entire universe. “All I had to do was solve a riddle—seems crazy. What did the Haunce make you do?”

Jane’s mask broke into a smile so full of genuine kindness that Tick wondered if the whole experience had maybe changed something inside her. “Isn’t it wonderful, Atticus? What does it say about our species that you and I could put aside our hatred for each other and work for the greater good? We should both feel very proud.”

Tick let out an uneasy laugh, not sure how he felt about the way she was acting. “It’s definitely pretty cool. So . . . you didn’t answer my question. What did you have to do? How did you do your part?”

Jane’s mask kept smiling. “Ah, yes. It was quite an amazing thing. The Haunce had me work through my master plan for how to achieve the Utopian Reality I’ve always wanted. What an invigorating experience it was to focus my mind and faculties in such a heightened, rushed state of anxiety.” She moved even closer to him, almost touching.

Tick didn’t know what to think. Maybe she—

A burst of pain exploded in his stomach, a wrenching, twisting stab of fire and needles. He stumbled back two steps and looked down. The hilt of a large knife jutted from his abdomen, a dark red bloodstain soaking his shirt, spreading.

Choking and sputtering a cough, he raised his eyes to Jane, whose now-angry mask matched the color of the growing stain around the knife.

“My plan started with something just like that,” she said.

Family

Tick fell to his knees, both hands gripped around the hilt of the knife, his hands wet with warm blood. He didn't dare pull it out. Clumpy fluid lodged in his throat, cutting off his breath along with the panic that choked him. He tried to suck down air through his nose, but it ended in a cough every time. Bugs of light swam in front of his eyes.

He couldn't speak. He didn't know what he'd say if he could.

Jane crouched down to the ground, the mud caking her robe. "Subtle. That's what I told Frazier. I knew I had to wait until the right moment when you weren't on guard and ready to strike back with your Chi'karda. A knife deep to the stomach—such a simple and beautiful thing. So old-fashioned. It's almost impossible to find help in time. You're dying, Atticus. Tick. Nothing can help you now."

Tick collapsed to the side, and a fresh, striking burst of pain burrowed through his entire body, as if the knife had sprouted steely vines that coursed through his insides. On the outer rim of his consciousness, he realized he'd never come close to understanding the fear of dying. Death had never truly seemed real. And now it was here, ready to drag him away like a stolen bag of gold.

Jane leaned over until the cool metal of her mask touched his ear. She whispered, "The rest of my plan is for the good of mankind and the Realities. Except for one thing, one item on the list—revenge, Atticus. Revenge. I want your last thought in life to be this: to know that I will hunt down each and every member of your family and kill them. Your friends as well. I'll kill them just like I did you. Good-bye."

She stood up, though Tick could barely see her. His vision blurred, dark specks swirling like a cloud of stinging gnats. He felt his life slipping away, a physical dwindling as if he were made of sand and it was slowly leaking out of a puncture in some outer skin. He thought of soulikens and how those small and permanent stamps of electric pulses and energy might be the very thing he felt seeping out of him into . . . wherever they went. His Alterants' soulikens had come to him, according to the Haunce. Maybe now they would go to that odd, ghostly creature of eternity.

Jane was walking away, stabbing her Staff into the mud.

Tick hated her.

Life was running away from him. He closed his eyes, wondering if he would ever open them again. What he saw appear out of the patchy darkness was Kayla. And Lisa. His parents. Paul and Sofia and Sato. He saw them as if he looked at a TV screen.

The Chi'karda exploded within him.

No build-up this time. No slow burn that escalated like stoked flames. It was an absolute detonation of power. His whole body became a conflagration, a perfect and consuming inferno of force and might. He didn't know he'd done it, but he was suddenly standing. A tornado of orange, fiery air swirled around him. He heard himself speak as if he were an outside observer.

“Jane, you're not going anywhere.”

Fists of Chi'karda

The fangen attacked Sato just as he landed on his twentieth compartment. Sharp claws dug into his shoulders and yanked him backward. Sato spun, swinging with a fist. He made contact, thumping the creature's face. With a horrible shriek, it let go and fell away, its thin, translucent wings flapping weakly.

Sato knew there were more fangen, that this would be a tricky task indeed. He quickly stuck a nanolocator patch onto the tiny boy shivering on the stone then moved to jump to the next rectangular hole. He was in midflight when a fangen swooped in and grabbed him, pulling his body out to the middle of the chamber, its legs wrapped around him as it tried to bite his neck.

Sato clutched the top of the creature's head by a tuft of diseased-looking hair and pushed its gaping mouth full of teeth away. Then he punched it, slipping around its body in that moment of weakness so he was on the thing's back. They hovered over the abyss.

"Take me back to that hole!" Sato screamed in its ear, pointing to the place he'd been going. "Take me now, or I'll snap your neck!" He wrapped his hands around the thin pole of the fangen's neck and started squeezing.

The creature had to have some instinct to survive, some will to live. Making sounds like a strangled banshee, it flew toward the place indicated. Sato jumped off and into the inset compartment as soon as he was close enough. He pivoted and kicked out, connecting with the fangen's stomach. It squawked and pulled back, choking and coughing.

Sato pulled out a patch and stuck it to the little girl next to him. He readied for the next one. Nothing about this was going to be very easy. He jumped.

~

Womp. Womp. Womp.

Surging throbs of Chi'karda sent waves of energy thumping away from Tick. He could feel its vibrations in the air, in the ground, in the forest behind him, shaking the deepest parts of the wood in the trees. His senses had heightened, almost unbearably so; the smells of mud and pine, the feel of the breeze, every sound amplified tenfold, the crisp clarity of his vision. It all felt wonderful and terrible at the same time.

Jane had stopped when he told her she wasn't going anywhere, probably consumed by curiosity. And, Tick hoped, a little scared. She turned around to

face him, standing about thirty yards away.

“You can’t handle that much Chi’karda,” she said; Tick heard each word as if she’d spoken it directly into his ear. “It’ll burn you to a crisp if you don’t let it go. Release it, Atticus. Or you’ll kill countless others along with . . .”

She faltered, her mask shifting downward just slightly, but enough to show she was looking at Tick’s stomach. His eyes fell to see what had caught her attention, and he almost cried out in shock.

The wooden hilt of the knife smoldered, slowly inching its way as if by magic out of his skin. The long blade followed, glowing a hot red. The whole area sizzled like a cooking steak, small wisps of smoke rising from the wound. The knife finally came all the way out and fell to the ground with a thump and another sizzle as it hit the wet mud. Tick watched in shock as the slice in his skin healed back together in a matter of seconds. He felt an intense burning where the wound had been, stronger even than the Chi’karda raging through his entire body.

His dad had once told him how he’d seemed to defy death several times as a kid. What it all meant, Tick didn’t know. Maybe his ability over Chi’karda went way further than he ever dreamed or hoped.

He looked back at Jane, quickly wiping the look of surprise from his face. “I’m getting control of it!” he shouted. “And you know I’m more powerful than you are! Give up. Now. Or I’ll blow you up along with everything else in the Factory.”

Jane’s fingers tightened around her Staff. “You’re an idiot child, Atticus. I wanted to kill you with subtle ease and avoid the destruction you might inflict if you let loose your chaotic abilities. But I’ll do it this way if I have to. I’ll never sleep in my bed again until I know the Realities are rid of Atticus Higginbottom. You’re about to die, boy. I hope you’ve enjoyed your short time alive.”

Tick’s anger built with every word she said, and he couldn’t take it anymore. He collected his power by thinking it, imagined what he wanted in his mind, like gathering a mental snowball with mental hands. The Chi’karda burned and roiled inside him, resisting as he compacted it tighter and tighter, compressing it into a dangerous and unstable sphere of pure energy. He saw the fiery orange cloud seeping back into his skin, like smoke in reverse.

Straining with the effort, he spoke through his trembling concentration. “I think I’ll keep living.” With a terrible scream, he threw his coiled power—all of it—at Jane.

A boom like a thousand strikes of lightning shook the world around him. Mud and dirt exploded from the ground in a straight path to Jane, as if it were a crowded minefield and every last mine went off at once. A visible wave of orange-tinged air slammed against her body, throwing her twenty feet into the

air. She flew backward until she landed far on the other side of the broken wooden fence, her Staff broken into several pieces.

Tick had no idea how he did what happened next. But he willed himself forward, wanting to be by her side instantly, faster than he could possibly run. He was out of patience and knew he had to finish her off. In a dizzying instant, he suddenly stood right next to her, looking down at her as she struggled to stand. With a distant thought, he realized that he'd just winked himself.

He reached down and grabbed Jane by the folds of her robe, communicating with his powers of Chi'karda without talking, almost without thinking. He easily lifted her up and held her over his head. Then he threw her at the forest. She sailed several hundred feet through the air, arms and legs flailing; a piercing shriek ripped from her lungs. Tick watched as she finally slammed into a large oak tree and crumpled to the ground below it. She didn't move, a twisted heap of arms and legs.

Tick drew in deep, ragged breaths as he looked around him. He saw the hole in the ground that Jane had created to pull them out of the underground Factory, as well as a much larger gap with broken and jagged edges that had probably been caused by the earthquakes. He winked to the edge of it and looked down to where people from the Fifth Reality were fighting Jane's creatures. Tick saw and heard the sights and sounds of battle, the clashes and the blood and the screams. He wanted to destroy the Factory, level it, crush it, disintegrate it.

"Master George!" he yelled, knowing the man was listening in somehow. "Get them out! Get them all out!"

Ten Kids

Tick wants us to wink them out!” Rutger yelled.

Sofia watched as Master George’s hands flew furiously to turn dials and flip switches, type on the keyboard, adjust his Barrier Wand. “How much time until the wave hits us?” he asked in a tight voice.

“Three minutes!”

“We’ll hold out until the last second. We must save every child we can!”

Sofia looked down to see that Paul had grabbed her hand. She squeezed back, terrified and hating how helpless she felt.

“Winking away the Fifth Army now,” Master George said, sweat flying off his ruddy, bald head as he worked. “But not Sato and Mothball. Not yet.”

“Two and half minutes,” Rutger said, his voice loud but sad.

~

Tick saw the tall people of the Fifth Reality suddenly disappear, winked away. The creatures they’d been fighting looked around in shock, growling and spitting.

Thankful that Master George had heard him, Tick had to assume that everyone was gone now. He hoped that George had also saved the kids Jane planned to use in her horrific experiments. He had to destroy the Factory now, before any of those monsters escaped. Then he’d finish off Jane and end this nightmare forever.

He closed his eyes for a brief moment, mentally gathering the streams and coils of Chi’karda, pulling it all in.

Then he fell to his knees with a scream, throwing his arms forward as if he were flinging his powers at the scene below him. His Chi’karda unleashed itself on the Factory, destroying everything in its fiery, angry path.

~

Sato’s entire body ached like never before. Worse than when he’d gone through the agony of having Chu’s Dark Infinity plague and being bound with ropes by Master George. His arms and legs screamed with weariness and hurt, begging him to stop.

But he didn’t. He kept jumping from compartment to compartment, slapping the nanolocator patches on kid after kid, moving on before he even saw them be winked away. All the while, he’d fought off the relentless fangen with punches and kicks. He’d even poked one in the eyeball and sent it

screeching away.

Mothball did her part on the other side of the vast, round chamber, leaping with more ease than Sato because of her height advantage. They were almost done. Sato could see the last row of inset rectangles just below him.

He landed in the latest cubbyhole, pulling out a patch before he even settled. A pretty girl with red hair lay curled in a ball, eyes lit with fear. He stuck the patch on her and turned to move on. Just as he did, a great explosion sounded from above, and the entire chamber started shaking again. Huge chunks of rock and metal fell through the air, cracking and clinging as they hit the sides along the way.

It had all started again. What went wrong! He dared not pause to think about it.

He punched a fangen just as it appeared, kicking it and punching again. The hideous thing backed off.

Sato jumped, ignoring the increased danger of debris and quaking. He landed in the next compartment and reached for a nanolocator patch.

~

The Bermuda Triangle headquarters building trembled and groaned.

“Thirty seconds!” Rutger yelled. Despite the terror and worry she felt herself, Sofia couldn’t help but feel bad for the poor little man. With his face flushed and sweat pouring off his skin, he looked like he might drop dead any second. “It’s already straining the cables to the max—they’re going to snap! We have to go! We have to go!”

Master George continued his frantic, feverish work. “Blasted! They’re still working hard. It must mean they haven’t reached everyone yet.”

“Time’s up!” Rutger said, pounding his fist on the desk. “Or we’ll all die with them!”

Sofia felt a storm of different feelings and emotions rip through her heart: fear for her life, fear for Sato’s life, sorrow for the kids. She squeezed Paul’s hand even tighter and waited, holding her breath. The building shook even harder now, groans of twisting metal hurting her ears.

Master George swore, something Sofia never thought she’d hear him do. Then, “Fine. Let’s finish this thing.”

He started tapping buttons.

~

The entire chamber was about to fall down around Sato. The shattering cracks and thunderous rumbles of crumbling stone had risen to a deafening roar. Just after placing a patch on the latest kid, he looked across the way at Mothball and saw her staring back at him through the rain of debris. Her eyes said it all.

They could die here if they didn't get winked out immediately—who knew when the shaking would stop, when things would settle. But then, almost at the exact same time, they both slowly nodded. They wouldn't leave—not until they'd saved every last prisoner.

Sato broke eye contact first and scooted to the edge of his current cubbyhole. He did a quick scan and counted. Ten kids. There were ten kids left. Five for him, five for Mothball.

He coiled for the jump, but just as he pushed off, he felt a quick and cold tingle shoot across his neck and down his spine.

“No!” he screamed. But it was too late. The chamber vanished around him.

~

Sofia barely had time to notice they'd winked into the Grand Canyon sitting room, barely had time to feel the relief of solid ground under her feet, when Sato and Mothball appeared right in front of her. The two of them looked like zombies, filthy and scratched and worn.

“No!” Sato yelled, twisting around on his feet, as if looking for something. “Send me back! There were ten more! Ten more!”

Master George appeared through a doorway, his face cramped with a tight smile. “The children should be down in the valley. Ah, Sato, Mothball, thank goodness you're—”

Sato ran to the man and grabbed him by the shirt. “Send me back! The whole place is falling down—they could die! There were ten more of them!”

Master George shook his head back and forth. “I'm . . . I'm terribly sorry, Sato. It's far too late—everything was set up back in the Bermuda Triangle station. I simply can't send you back from here. I'm very sorry.”

“You have to!” Sato's arms shook with fury or exhaustion. Probably both. “You have to send me back! We didn't get them all!”

“It's impossible,” Master George whispered sadly. “Quite impossible.”

Sato slumped to the floor. Sofia looked over and saw Mothball had collapsed on a couch, her eyes closed, tears leaking out from beneath their lids. Paul moved to crouch beside Sato and put a hand on his back.

Sato shook it off. “We left ten kids! Ten!”

Sofia joined them, sitting on the other side of Sato. “But think of how many you saved. And the others might escape in all the chaos.”

She and Paul pulled Sato into an awkward three-person hug. He resisted at first, but then finally collapsed into Sofia's arms, sobbing.

“Think of how many you saved,” she repeated.

Collision

Tick stumbled away from the collapsing Factory, sucking the power of Chi'karda back inside him. He felt the flaming heat of it burn his insides. It had taken only three waves of it to destroy the complex. The sounds of crunching and cracking and splintering filled the air as the ground sank, swirling like a whirlpool of mud. He'd begun the chain reactions of destructive entropy that would leave the place as nothing but sand within minutes.

The earth began to give beneath Tick. There was no way he could outrun the collapse. With a thought, he quickly winked back to the forest where he'd thrown Jane's body just minutes ago.

She still lay in a heap at the bottom of the oak tree, but her arms were moving, and Tick heard her groan. His heart sank. He'd hoped she would be dead from the collision, because he dreaded the prospect of having to do anything more to her. His initial anger and adrenaline had subsided, and the reality of the situation was hitting home. If he finished what he'd set out to do, it meant he would have to end it, right here, right now.



He had to do it, no matter what. Unchecked, she could and would murder millions and billions of people. She'd already proven that. Tick had to finish it.

He stepped toward her.

The ground exploded under Tick, a wave of invisible force lifting him off his feet and throwing him backward. Before he could gather his wits, his back slammed into the soft ground, knocking the air out of him. He pushed himself up onto his knees, gasping for breath. If the mud had been dried and hard, he could very well have broken his spine.

When a rush of air finally filled his lungs, he jumped to his feet. Jane stood

a few yards away, both of her hands outstretched, palms facing him. Tick reached for the Chi'karda that still churned within him.

“Wait,” she said. “Wait. If we keep at this something really bad will happen.”

Tick didn't waste time with words. He pushed a surge of Chi'karda straight at her, hurling it like a volley of sun flares. The power hit her, twisting her body up into the air and back down to the mud where she slid thirty feet and smacked into the base of a tall pine.

Tick switched gears, concentrating on the trees around her. Using his mind as commander, willing what he wanted to happen, he made a dozen trees around her dissolve, the wood bursting into a swirl of tiny particles. They flew around her in a brown tornado, encircling her like a swarm of muddy bees. Then he made them collapse, sealing the wood back together like he'd done before several times now, though unconsciously.

With a loud smacking sound, followed by cracks and groans, a large mass of twisted wood formed around Jane, trapping her inside. Crushing her.

Tick doubled over, his hands on his knees, pulling in rapid breaths. The mental effort of doing such a thing made him feel as though he'd run ten miles in a sprint. He glanced back up at the hideous structure of coiled tree parts. No way she survived that. No way.

The thought had barely formed when the entire formation exploded, chunks and chips of wood flying out in all directions. Tick fell to the ground and covered his head with both arms. He felt the prick of splinters, the whoosh of bigger pieces flying right over him. When it seemed as though the worst had passed, he looked up and saw Jane standing there, her arms once again outstretched.

“Atticus, we have to stop this!” she yelled.

Tick jumped to his feet. She was trying to trick him; he knew it. He threw another blast of Chi'karda at her; she blocked it with a visible bubble of solid air tinted orange. The concussion wave bounced back and knocked him to the ground, jolting the breath out of him once again. As he struggled for air, he clawed to gather another pool of his power, knowing she'd probably finish him off while he was down.

But when he staggered to his feet, she only stood there, her mask surprisingly showing concern, not anger.

“Atticus, stop,” she said in her scratchy, painful voice. “Give me five minutes to explain!”

Tick felt a rush of anger just as he pulled in a long, blissful breath. “It's too late, Jane! I can't let you go one more day killing and hurting!”

A ball of power filled him, almost bursting his chest. He unleashed it, threw it all at Jane.

Her shield formed again, resisting his attack. Tick was ready for the rebound of force this time, and he leaned into it, fighting it with his own strength. He let all his fears and inhibitions fall away, all his caution. She seemed to be getting stronger, and he knew he had to go for it. Screaming, he searched and probed his inner mind and body for every last trickle of Chi'karda, channeling it and throwing it at Jane.

She fought back. A wind tore through the air as the crackle of electricity and booms of thunder filled the world around them. Streaks of orange swirled and kicked; bursts of fire ignited here and there like ribbons of flame; the trees in the forest bent unnaturally away from them; mud and chunks of wood took flight, swirling like loose paper in a tornado. As Tick and Jane fought, their battling powers looked like two stars colliding, white and brilliant and blinding.

Tick hadn't stopped screaming. The world rushed and burned around him. He couldn't see. Life seemed to be draining out of his body. He didn't know how much longer he could last. A trickle of despair dented his heart. He pushed harder.

Somehow he heard Jane yell the words, "We have to stop!"

"No!" Tick shouted back in a ripped shriek that tore through his burning throat. He pushed harder, flinging his whole life at her.

A sound like the world splitting in two pierced his ears, his brain, his every nerve.

And then, in a sudden instant, everything stopped.

All light disappeared. Tick felt himself flying through a dark and silent wind.

Time stretched on, blank and quiet. Eventually, he felt nothing.

The Detour

I can't believe my own eyes."

Tick barely heard the words. A man. His voice was soft, but slightly . . . menacing, like small, sharp-nosed worms, slowly working their way into Tick's brain, needling and hurting. The world around Tick was still dark.

The stranger spoke again. "Atticus Higginbottom and Mistress Jane. Together, with me, at last."

Tick felt himself blinking, felt tears in his eyes, felt pain coursing through every inch of his body. But still nothing—blackness.

The man wouldn't be quiet, and his every word throbbed in Tick's skull. "I have no idea how it happened, but I can't say I'm not pleased. It'll be nice to have some help. I'm sure between the three of us, we can get out of here."

Tick kept blinking and finally saw a faint smudge of light against the darkness.

"Where . . . where are we?"

Jane. It was Jane. She sounded even worse than usual.

The man chuckled, a horribly unpleasant sound. "You're safe and sound, Mistress. No worries. Plenty to eat around here. Plenty of everything."

The light grew in Tick's vision. Increased its pace of brightening. Shapes began to form.

"I . . . warned him," Jane said, her voice filled with resignation, as if she'd just accepted a horrible truth. "I . . ." She didn't finish.

Something clicked, and suddenly Tick could see everything. Gasping, he sat up, ignoring the bolts of pain that shot through his body. He sat on a beach with a perfect blue sky hanging overhead and crystal-clear water lapping against the white sand. An enormous and endless ocean stretched to his right, a forest of palm trees to his left. Mistress Jane lay flat on the ground, several feet away, her mask cracked and tilted.

And sitting cross-legged next to Tick was Reginald Chu. The man who'd once ruled the Fourth Reality. The man who'd tried to rule all Thirteen with his Dark Infinity. The man who'd been sent to—

"Welcome to the Nonex, Atticus," Chu said. "I hope you're ready to help me get the heck out of here."

The Mission

Sofia sat between Paul and Sato on the couch, her arms folded, her foot tapping. Sally and Priscilla, both of whom had been in charge of collecting and helping the children rescued from the Factory, sat across from them, both looking down and as quiet as everyone else. Mothball was on the floor, leaning back against the bricks of the fireplace.

Master George and Rutger finally entered the room, their faces grave.

“I believe we finally have our report,” Master George announced, looking down at a stack of papers clasped in his hands. “The members of Sato’s Fifth Army are mostly safe and accounted for, having lost only”—he cleared his throat—“seventeen lives in battle. It looks like Sato and Mothball rescued ninety-seven children in all, and they are currently receiving the very best in treatment from Realitant doctors.”

“We lost ten of them,” Sato mumbled under his breath. It was the first thing he’d said since winking away from the Thirteenth.

“Why . . . yes, Sato. Yes, we did.” Master George paused, his eyes showing so much love for Sato that Sofia felt tears moisten her eyes. “The damage from our latest affairs is quite catastrophic. Every single Reality has suffered, and the recovery will take years. The worst by far is the Thirteenth, where . . . the final conflict inflicted utter devastation. It will take some time to discover just how much.”

Sofia spoke up. “What happened to Tick?”

“Yeah,” Paul said. “Out with it.”

Master George nodded uncomfortably. “Yes, yes, we’re all very concerned about Master Atticus and what has become of him.” His voice squeaked on the last three words; a tear spilled down his cheek. “I’m afraid we have quite troubling—and confusing—news.”

Sofia’s heart froze; her breath stopped.

“I can’t say I understand it,” he continued, fidgeting with his papers. “His nanolocator started working again once his business with the Haunce was complete. But then . . . it just . . . well, it reported back something we’ve never seen before. Rutger, you tell them. I can’t bear to say another bloody word.” He threw the papers on the floor and stomped out of the room.

Rutger took a moment before finally speaking.

“According to our system, Atticus Higginbottom has ceased to exist.”

Lisa had just fallen asleep—after a long time of trying to do so—when she felt someone shaking her by the shoulders, gently. She opened her eyes, ready to scream out in panic, when the sight of her mom silenced it. The glow of the moon shining through the window lit up Lorena Higginbottom’s face, making it look somehow kind and fiercely determined at the same time.

Lisa knew she was up to something. “What’s going on?”

“Keep quiet and follow me,” her mom whispered. “Don’t make a peep—you know your dad will wake up at the sneeze of a mouse.”

Confused but intrigued, Lisa shook her grogginess away and got up from bed. Then the two of them tiptoed out of her room, down the hall, then down the stairs, both keeping to the silent spots as best they could. Before long, Lisa’s mom had led her all the way down to the basement.

After flicking on the light, Lisa repeated her earlier question. “What’s going on?”

Her mom walked over to a dusty corner of the large room and dragged a couple of boxes away from the wall, then crouched down. “I know both you and I have been feeling like we want to help. To finally do our part in this whole mess. Especially now that my son”—she faltered, choked back the usual cry that had come so often since Master George had sent word that Tick was missing—“is nowhere to be found. I think it’s time we took a little of our own action.”

Lisa nodded, feeling the same swell of emotion, knowing she couldn’t speak without cracking. But she agreed. Agreed wholeheartedly. She wanted to *do* something. She wanted to act.

Her mom gripped a panel of the unpainted wall, and to Lisa’s surprise it came loose. She lifted out a large square and placed it on the ground. Swirls of dust puffed through the air. In the dark recess behind her, an object glinted.

“You’ve been hiding something down here?” Lisa asked.

“Yes. Though I never, never, never thought I’d have to use it again.” She leaned over and reached into the secret compartment.

“What?” Lisa asked, moving closer to get a better look. “What is it?”

Her mom pulled out a long, golden tube with dials and switches running down its sides, then held it up. “It’s a Barrier Wand, sweetie. It’s gonna help us find my boy.”

A Glossary of People, Places, and All Things Important

Atticus Higginbottom—A Realitant from the state of Washington in Reality Prime.

Alterant—Different versions of the same person existing in different Realities. It is extremely dangerous for Alterants to meet one another.

Annika—A spy for the Realitants who was killed by a pack of fangen.

Barf Scarf—The red-and-black scarf that Tick used to wear at all times to hide the ugly birthmark on his neck.

Barrier Wand—The device used to wink people and things between Realities and between heavily concentrated places of Chi'karda within the same Reality. Works very easily with inanimate objects, and can place them almost anywhere. To transport humans, they must be in a place concentrated with Chi'karda (like a cemetery) and have a nanolocator that transmits their location to the Wand. The wand is useless without the Chi'karda Drive, which channels and magnifies the mysterious power.

Barrier Staff—A special Barrier Wand created by Mistress Jane.

Benson—A servant of Reginald Chu in the Fourth Reality.

Bermuda Triangle—The most concentrated area of Chi'karda in each Reality. Still unknown as to why.

Billy “The Goat” Cooper—Tick's biggest nemesis at Jackson Middle School.

Blade of Shattered Hope—A weapon created by Mistress Jane that allows her to harness the power of dark matter and utilize the linking of her Alterants to sever a Reality from existence.

Bryan Cannon—A fisherman in Reality Prime.

Bugaboo Soldiers—The nemeses of the Fifth Reality, these assassins are bent on taking over their world. Often dressed as clowns, they are very unstable.

Chi'karda—The mysterious force that controls Quantum Physics. It is the scientific embodiment of conviction and choice, which in reality rules the universe. Responsible for creating the different Realities.

Chi'karda Drive—The invention that revolutionized the universe by

harnessing, magnifying, and controlling Chi'karda. It has long been believed that travel between Realities is impossible without it.

Chu Industries—The company that practically rules the world of the Fourth Reality. Known for countless inventions and technologies, including many that are malicious in nature.

Command Center—Master George's headquarters in the Bermuda Triangle, where Chi'karda levels are monitored and to where his many nanolocators report various types of information.

Darkin (Dark Infinity) Project—A menacing, giant device created by Reginald Chu of the Fourth Reality to manipulate others' minds. Destroyed by Tick.

Earwig Transponder—An insect-like device inserted into the ear that can scramble listening devices and help track its host.

Edgar Higginbottom—Tick's father.

Entropy—The law of nature that states all things move toward destruction. Related to fragmentation.

Factory, The—Located in the Thirteenth Reality, it is where Mistress Jane "manufactures" her abominable creations.

Fangen—A creature created by Mistress Jane utilizing the twisted and mutated version of Chi'karda found in the Thirteenth Reality. Formed from a variety of no fewer than twelve different animals, the short and stocky creatures are bred to kill first and ask questions later. They can also fly.

Fifth Army, The—Sato's fighting unit, made up of people from the Fifth Reality.

Firekelt—Creation of Mistress Jane. A monster covered in hundreds of cloth-like strips that ignite on demand.

Fragmentation—When a Reality begins losing Chi'karda levels on a vast scale, it can no longer maintain itself as a major alternate version of the world and will eventually disintegrate into nothing. Its cause is related to entropy.

Frazier Gunn—A loyal servant of Mistress Jane.

Frupey—Nickname for Fruppenschneiger, Sofia's butler.

Gnat Rat—A malicious invention of Chu Industries in the Fourth Reality. Releases dozens of mechanical hornets that are programmed to attack a certain individual based on a nanolocator, DNA, or blood type.

Grand Canyon—A satellite location of the Realitants. Second only to the Bermuda Triangle in Chi'karda levels. Still unknown as to why.

Grand Minister—Supreme ruler of the Fifth Reality.

Grinder Beast—An enormous, rhinoceros-like creature with dozens of legs in the Tenth Reality.

Halters—A weapon that shoots out tiny darts laced with a paralyzing serum.

Hans Schtiggenclubberheimer—The man who started the Scientific Revolution in the Fourth Reality in the early nineteen-hundreds. In a matter of decades, he helped catapult the Fourth far beyond the other Realities in terms of technology.

Haunce, The—A mysterious, ghostly, powerful being made up of billions upon billions of soulakens.

Henry—A boy from the Industrial Barrens in the Seventh Reality.

Hillenstat—A Realitant doctor from the Second Reality.

Jimmy “The Voice” Porter—A Realitant from the Twelfth Reality. Has no tongue.

Katrina Kay—A Realitant from the Ninth Reality.

Kayla Higginbottom—Tick’s youngest sister.

Klink—Guard of the Execution Exit at the End of the Road Insane Asylum.

Kyooopy—Nickname used by the Realitants for Quantum Physics.

Ladies of Blood and Sorrow—A mysterious society of women loyal to Mistress Jane.

Lemon Fortress—Mistress Jane’s castle in the Thirteenth Reality.

Lisa Higginbottom—Tick’s older sister.

Lorena Higginbottom—Tick’s mother.

Mabel Fredrickson—Tick’s great-aunt. Lives in Alaska.

Master George—The current leader of the Realitants.

Metaspide—A vicious robotic creature from the Fourth Reality that resembles a spider.

Mistress Jane—A former Realitant and ruler of the Thirteenth Reality, she wields an uncanny power over Chi’karda. Since the accident in which she was “melded” with fragments of the Dark Infinity weapons, her power has increased tenfold.

Mothball—A Realitant from the Fifth Reality.

Ms. Sears—Tick’s favorite librarian.

Muffintops—Master George’s cat.

Multiverse—An old term used by Reality Prime scientists to explain the theory that Quantum Physics has created multiple versions of the universe.

Nancy Zeppelin—A Realitant from Wisconsin in Reality Prime.

Nanolocator—A microscopic electronic device that can crawl into a person’s skin and forever provide information on their whereabouts, Chi’karda levels, etc.

Nonex—When Alterants meet, one disappears and enters the Nonex. A

complete mystery to the Realitants.

Norbert McGillicuddy—A post office worker in Alaska who helped Tick and his dad escape an attack by Frazier Gunn.

Paul Rogers—A Realitant from Florida in Reality Prime.

Phillip—Owner and operator of the Stroke of Midnight Inn in the Sixth Reality.

Pick—Master George's nickname for a major decision in which Chi'karda levels spike considerably. Some Picks have been known to create or destroy entire Realities.

Priscilla Persiphone—A Realitant from the Seventh Reality.

Quantum Physics—The science that studies the physical world of the extremely small. Most scholars are baffled by its properties and at a loss to explain them. Theories abound. Only a few know the truth: that a completely different power rules this realm, which in turn rules the universe: Chi'karda.

Quinton Hallenhaffer—A Realitant from the Second Reality.

Ragers—An advanced weapon that harnesses extreme amounts of static electricity. When unleashed, it collects matter in a violent, earthen ball that can shatter whatever gets in its way.

Realitants—An organization sworn to discover and chart all known Realities. Founded in the 1970s by a group of scientists from the Fourth Reality, who then used Barrier Wands to recruit other quantum physicists from other Realities.

Reality—A separate and complete version of the world, of which there may be an infinite number. The most stable and strongest is called Reality Prime. So far, thirteen major branches off of Prime have been discovered. Realities are created and destroyed by enormous fluctuations in Chi'karda levels. Examples:

Fourth—Much more advanced technologically than the other Realities due to the remarkable vision and work of Hans Schtiggenschlubberheimer.

Fifth—Quirks in evolution led to a very tall human race.

Eighth—The world is covered in water due to much higher temperatures that were caused by a star fusion anomaly triggered in another galaxy by an alien race.

Eleventh—Quirks in evolution and diet led to a short and robust human race.

Thirteenth—Somehow a mutated and very powerful version of Chi'karda exists here.

Reality Echo—An object that literally exists in two Realities at once, making the object indestructible.

Reginald Chu—Tick's science teacher in Reality Prime. Also the person

in the Fourth Reality who founded Chu Industries and turned it into a worldwide empire. They are Alterants of each other.

Renee—An inmate at the End of the Road Insane Asylum.

Ripple Quake—A violent geological disaster caused by a massive disturbance in Chi’karda.

Rutger—A Realitant from the Eleventh Reality.

Sally T. Jones—A Realitant from the Tenth Reality.

Sato—A Realitant from Japan in Reality Prime.

Sato Tadashi—Former Grand Minister of the Fifth Reality, killed by the Bugaboo soldiers. An Alterant of the Realitant Sato.

Shockpulse—An injection of highly concentrated electromagnetic nanobots that seek out and destroy the tiny components of a nanolocator, rendering it useless.

Shurric—Short for Sonic Hurricaner, this weapon is the more powerful version of the Sound Slicer. Shoots out a heavily concentrated force of sound waves, almost too low for the human ear to register but powerful enough to destroy just about anything in its direct path.

Sleeks—Creations of Mistress Jane. Wispy and strong, lightning fast. They guard the forest that surrounds the Factory.

Slinkbeast—A vicious creature that lives in the Mountains of Sorrow in the Twelfth Reality.

Snooper Bug—A hideous cross-breed of birds and insects created by the mutated power of the Chi’karda in the Thirteenth Reality. Can detect any known weapon or poison and can kill with one quick strike of its needle-nosed beak. Pets of Mistress Jane.

Sofia Pacini—A Realitant from Italy in Reality Prime.

Soulikens—An imprint or stamp on reality, created by natural energy and Chi’karda, that becomes a lingering piece of one’s self that will never cease to exist.

Sound Slicer—A small weapon outdated by the much more powerful Shurric.

Spinner—A special device that shoots out a circular plane of laser light, displaying video images on its surface.

Squeezers—A grenade that shoots out strong wires that contract and curl up.

Tick—Nickname for Atticus Higginbottom.

Tingle Wraith—A collection of microscopic animals from the Second Reality, called spilphens, that can form together into a cloud while rubbing against each other to make a horrible sound called the Death Siren.

Tollaseat—Mothball’s father, from the Fifth Reality.

Waterkelt—Creation of Mistress Jane. A monster made completely out of water.

William Schmidt—A Realitant from the Third Reality.

Windasill—Mothball's mother, from the Fifth Reality.

Windbike—An invention of Chu Industries, this vehicle is a motorcycle that can fly, consuming hydrogen out of the air for its fuel. Based on an extremely complex gravity-manipulation theorem first proposed by Reginald Chu.

Winking—The act of traveling between or within Realities by use of a Barrier Wand. Causes a slight tingle to the skin on one's shoulders and back.

Discussion Questions

1. Tick has to deal with a lot of bad things happening to his family. Often he must weigh their safety against much bigger dangers that could result in enormous loss of life. What would you do in such a situation?

2. How do you feel about Mistress Jane after reading this book? Do you think she's purely evil? Is there any truth to her feeling that the ends justify the means? In other words, if the end result is her perfect Utopian Reality, is it okay for her to do anything, no matter how bad, to reach that point?

3. We learn a little more about Sofia and why she doesn't feel very welcome at home. How does that make you feel?

4. We find out that Tick is the only version of himself still alive throughout the known Realities. He has no surviving Alterants. What's your theory as to what this means? Do you think it has anything to do with his odd powers over Chi'karda?

5. What do you think of the Haunce? It seems distant and unwilling to interfere with human life until the entire universe is in jeopardy. And yet it obviously has strong powers. Should it help out more?

6. How do you feel about the progress Tick has made in controlling his powers? Is his power something you would wish for, or would it be too much pressure and too dangerous?

7. Sato is devastated that he wasn't able to save every child from the Factory before being winked out by Master George. Put yourself in that situation. How would you feel? Would you be able to focus on the ones you saved instead of being haunted by the ones you didn't?

8. Were you surprised that Tick ended up reunited with Mr. Chu and Mistress Jane in the Nonex? What do you think is in store for them in Book 4?

THE 13TH REALITY

THE VOID OF MIST AND THUNDER



JAMES DASHNER

THE 13TH REALITY

Book 4

The Void of Mist and Thunder

James Dashner

Illustrated by
Brandon Dorman



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A Mutiny in Time



This one is for the Storymakers.

You know who you are.

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I can't believe the series has come to an end. It's been a long and sometimes tough journey, but I'm so proud of the story and thankful to the people who helped push it through to the finish. Particularly Chris Schoebinger and Lisa Mangum. Without them it absolutely never would have happened. Much appreciation to all my other friends at Shadow Mountain too.

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A Very Special Boy

It was all about the soulikens.

Master George sat in his study, the lights dimmed, Muffintops purring in a corner, the first light of dawn's birth still an hour off. He stared at the wall as if the most fascinating thing in the Realities had been stapled there for him to see whenever he wished, but it was only a knot in the wood of his paneling. A knot that had two eyes and a mouth if you looked at it just right, and for some reason it reminded him of a boy named Atticus Higginbottom.

Atticus. Tick. The young man who changed everything.

The boy who'd disappeared from existence.

It was a shame. More than a shame. It was a downright tragedy. Master George had never ached in his heart so much for someone lost. Right when they'd finally begun to understand why the boy had such extraordinary powers, why he was able to harness and use Chi'karda as if he were himself a Barrier Wand—and a powerful Wand at that, even more so than Mistress Jane, who had a unique and tragic story of her own—he was gone.

But none of that really mattered anymore. It wasn't the *reason* George missed Master Atticus so much. He missed him—ached for him—because the boy had become like a son to him. So innocent, yet brave. So genuine. Such a kid, but so grown up. Oh, how he missed that dear, dear boy.

He was a wonder.

Sato had completed the mission George had asked of him. He had visited each Reality and searched until he had found the same thing in each one: a grave for the Alterants of Atticus Higginbottom—the boy's "twins" in the other twelve Realities. Never before had such an odd coincidence occurred, where only one version of a person remained throughout all the Realities. They'd never know if there was some deep cosmic reason behind it, or how it had happened.

But one thing was for certain: every one of those Alterants' soulikens had traveled to and collected within the body of the one remaining Atticus who had lived in Reality Prime. It had changed his structure, his makeup, his quantum mechanics. He was full of Chi'karda, filled beyond measure with the

powers that bound and controlled the universe. Filled beyond anything mankind could ever hope to recreate or dream about.

He was lost now, gone from existence.

There'd probably never be another quite like him, in far more ways than one.

George called for Muffintops. He needed to hug a friend.

Part 1



The Nonex



A Gash in the Forest

The forest smelled of things dead, things rotting.

Jacob Gillian paid the stench no mind, walking his merry way along the narrow path that threaded through the tall oaks and pines like a dried-out stream. Of course, the reason he paid it no mind was because he'd lost his sense of smell thirty years ago in an unfortunate spice sniffing contest. His grandson, Chip, had to tell him that the place stunk like a three-week-old dead rat stuck under the pipes.

The two of them had been hiking side by side for well over an hour, knowing full well that something horrible had happened deep within the dark woods. Exactly *what* had happened was still a mystery, and the reason they were out there. Jacob had heard the awful sound of ripping and shredding and booming. Chip had smelled the nose-wrinkling stench. Those two things together spelled trouble, and by golly, the source behind it needed finding out.

Jacob and his grandson had moved into the boonies after Chip's parents had been killed in a train collision near Louisville. Ever since then, they'd learned to live with little and less, loving the wild freedom and exhilaration of being smack-dab in the middle of nowhere. Their closest neighbor lived a good thirty miles down the poorly maintained state road, and the nearest town was forty miles in the other direction. But that's just how Jacob liked it, and the life had seemed to grow on Chip as well.

One day they'd return to civilization and start learnin' Chip on the ways of society. But for now, there was time. Time to heal, time to grow, time to enjoy. Time to have time.

"I think I see something up there, Grandpa," Chip said, a little too enthusiastically, considering the circumstances that had brought them out into the woods.

"What is it?" Old Jacob couldn't see much better than he could smell.

"There's a bright patch. Seems like it goes all the way up to the sky!"

"On the path or off it?"

Chip grabbed Jacob's hand and started hurrying down the little ribbon of

beaten leaves and undergrowth. “Just to the right of it. We’re almost there!”

Jacob followed along as careful as he could while still keeping up with Chip’s eager steps. Warning bells rang inside his mind, but he did what he’d done since the day he’d stepped out into the humid fields of Korea as a soldier—he ignored them. Curiosity always won out in his book, and courage came as naturally as a nice belch after dinner.

They’d just rounded a bend, skirting past two mammoth pines that looked like brothers, when Chip suddenly pulled up short. Jacob ran right past him, almost yanking his grandson’s arm out of its socket when the boy didn’t let go. But then Jacob saw what had stopped the kid, and all he could do was stand and stare. He felt Chip’s sweaty hand slip out of his own.

Fifty yards ahead of them, a swath of the forest had been wiped from existence and replaced by a brushstroke of . . . something else. Starting deep in the ground and shooting all the way to the sky was a wide gash in reality, a window to another place. Jacob could see part of a beach, the deep blue waters of the ocean beside it, a sun where there shouldn’t *be* a sun. The time was almost noon, and the *real* ball of fire was directly overhead. It was as if someone had clawed a rip in the reality of this world and replaced it with another.

“What in the great dickens are we lookin’ at?” Jacob whispered.

“Grandpa?” was all Chip managed in reply. His voice shook with equal parts confusion and terror.

“I’ve been from one end of this world to the other,” Jacob said, not sure if he was talking to himself or to his grandson. “And I’ve never seen a thing like that in my life.”

“Let’s go home.”

“Home?” Jacob tore his eyes away from the spectacle and looked down at Chip. “Didn’t you hear what I just said? This is a once in a lifetime opportunity! Let’s go check her out.”

Jacob took Chip’s hand once again, and they started marching closer to the impossible vision of another world streaked across their own. They’d come to within twenty feet when a person appeared on the beach, stepping into the picture from the right edge of where reality had been torn apart.

It was a lady, though Jacob could only tell that from the ratty, filthy dress she wore; a hood was pulled up over her head. A red mask, seemingly made out of metal, covered her face. The expression on the mask was one of anger.

She saw them just as they saw her, and she stopped to stare, the features of the mask *shifting* to create an expression of absolute shock.

Jacob took a step backward before he realized what he was doing.

“Who are you?” the woman asked, her voice raw and scratchy, like it

came out of a throat scarred with acid. “Do you know how this happened?”

Jacob’s mouth had turned into a bucket of dust, and he couldn’t remember how his tongue or voice box worked. He tried getting words out, but nothing came except the slightest hint of a croak.

Surprisingly, Chip spoke up. “Lots of bad sounds came from over here, and the whole place is stinky. Me and my grandpa were just trying to see what happened.”

Such bravery from the kid meant Jacob had to speak. He found his voice. “Where you from, miss? Um, if you don’t mind me asking.”

The lady’s mask melted—literally, by the looks of it—into a frown. “I’m from the Thirteenth Reality. Where are you?”

Jacob swallowed a lump the size of his big toe. “Um . . . Kentucky?”

Before the lady could respond, her image and everything around her suddenly spun into a tornado of colors that quickly merged and transformed into a mass of gray. It swirled and swirled, picking up speed and creating a wind that tore at Jacob’s clothing. And then the sound of terrible thunder seemed to come from everywhere at once, shaking the forest and splintering Jacob’s skull with pain.

When the spinning mass of gray mist expanded and took him, he had the strange thought that although he certainly wasn’t a cat, curiosity had killed him all the same.



A Formidable Foe

Mistress Jane winked herself a thousand yards down the beach as soon as the first sign of trouble appeared with the strange gash into another reality. She'd been talking to an old man and his boy, just beginning to wonder if she dared try to step through and escape the Nonex, when the whole thing collapsed into a spinning vortex of gray mist. It was all gone now, the echoes of the detonating thunder that had accompanied its short but catastrophic end just now rumbling away to oblivion.

Interesting. That was all she could come up with to describe what she'd witnessed. Very, very interesting. She had the faintest spark of an idea as to what had actually happened. It gave her something to contemplate while trapped in her bizarre new world.

She turned away and resumed her long walk down the never-ending beach. The salty breeze coming off the ocean waters stirred her robe, and she wished she could take off her mask and feel the wind against her cheeks once more. But it hurt to remove the thing, and even if she did, the result would be disappointing. The nerves of her skin were mostly burned away, replaced by the particles of Chu's Dark Infinity weapon. She felt things in a different way now. Not unpleasant, necessarily, but not the same.

Chu. Reginald Chu. Why did she have to think of the man?

She'd spent the last week with him and that upstart boy Atticus Higginbottom. In the Nonex, there was nowhere else to go. They were on an island that sometimes seemed small and other times, gigantic. Nothing made sense in this place. You could begin eating a piece of fresh fruit and have the thing turn rotten before you finished. Fish flew through the air, and birds swam underwater. Trees shifted in the night—or what passed for night. It had been three days since the sun last set below the horizon. Everything here was wrong.

Not to mention the bad company. Chu was nasty—always grumpy, always degrading in how he spoke to her, always arrogant. Atticus was nice enough, considering the three of them were bitter enemies, one to another, but he had his own kind of arrogance, as if his innocence and goodwill were

tangible things that floated around his body, pointing out how everyone else wasn't worthy to be in his presence. The boy made her ill. And angry. And thirsty for revenge.

But none of that mattered right now. None of it. They all had the same goal at the moment, and that was to get out of the blasted nowhere they currently called home.

A flicker of movement to her right caught her attention. She stopped just in time to see the boy come out from behind some trees, carrying some stray wood. He dumped it on the ground.

How sweet, she thought bitterly. *He's making a campfire. What a Boy Scout.* Same team or not, they all tried to keep their distance from one another as best they could.

When Atticus noticed her, a look of sheer disappointment painted his features. This both hurt Jane and made her angry.

"Where's Chu?" she asked, as though the boy were her servant and not her mortal enemy.

Atticus shrugged. "I don't know." He knelt on the ground and started arranging the logs in an orderly pyramid.

"You find some matches I don't know about?" Jane asked. "If you think I'm in the mood to help—"

The logs burst into flame, all of them. An instant bonfire.

Atticus stood up, gave her a glare. But then his look changed to guilt, as if it were against his nature to be mean. Then he smiled, which made Jane angrier.

"Altering the physical state of wood from a solid to a gas?" he asked with another shrug. "You think I can't do that by myself? Come on. That's as easy as lighting a match, Mistress Jane."

He didn't wait for a response, just turned and walked away, disappearing back into the woods.

Igniting fire. Such a simple thing, really. And yet, for some reason, it terrified her to see the boy do it without any obvious effort whatsoever. She flopped down onto the sand, staring at the waves as they lapped onto the beach and tried to ignore the icy fear trickling through her veins.

Atticus—the boy known as Tick—was a foe to be reckoned with.



Jane had been sitting on the beach for hours, staring out at the wondrous ocean that wasn't really an ocean, when suddenly the horizon jumped up and down. The water turned from blue to green to black, then froze into ice, crackling; then it was hot and boiling. A fish popped out of the shifting water

and spread its fins like wings, hovering a few seconds before exploding into a spray of rainbow-colored sparkles. Lightning shot down from a cloudless sky and hit the water, creating huge splashes of something dark and thick, like oil. She looked down at the sand, and within a matter of seconds, it had changed color three times.

Par for the course in this place that seemed beyond the realm of the physics she understood so well.

She'd just lifted her gaze back to the ocean when a thump of sound shook the air and the ground, a thunderclap that made her bounce off the sand. She threw out her arms for balance and searched the beach for any sign of what had happened.

The sound thumped again. Then again. The land around her shook, but this time didn't stop. The trees behind her trembled; several were uprooted and fell, crashing against each other. Dots of light fell from the sky, vanishing before they hit the ground. Farther down the beach, pillars of stone shot through the sand, rising up until it looked like they had their very own Stonehenge to explore. The ocean froze, then cracked into a million icy pieces, exploding upward a hundred feet, then falling again like a rain of crystal. The sand nearby swirled in little tornadoes, the funnels spinning faster and faster.

Suddenly Chu was by her side, having sprinted in from the shifting woods. He collapsed next to her when another jolt of sound and quaking shook the world.

"This is madness!" he shouted at her. "Things are becoming more and more unstable!"

Jane wanted to argue with him—that was always her instinct—but she knew he was right. First, the strange gash in the air earlier, peeking into another Reality. And now this, a sudden uptick in the strangeness that was the Nonex. She nodded at Chu.

The thumps of noise stopped. The land grew still. The pillars that had risen on the beach slowly sank back underground. The ocean liquefied, glistening and smooth. The small funnels of spinning sand stopped, collapsing with a dusty poof. All seemed still and quiet.

Thoughts and plans were forming inside Jane's head, but they weren't solid enough to describe. Like an epiphany in another language, the ideas still needed to be translated, but they were there all the same.

Reginald Chu had a look in his eyes that made her think his mind had spun in the same direction as hers.

"Together," he whispered, his voice still loud in the sudden silence. "If we can work together, then I think there's a way for both of us to be happy in

the end.”





One Last Try

It's hot, Mom."

Lorena Higginbottom looked over at her daughter as they trampled through the woods. The girl did have a few strands of hair matted against her forehead, like squiggly little worms. "Well, the fall weather should be here soon."

"I'm so hot my *sweat* is sweating."

"That doesn't make sense, dear."

"I know."

They'd visited these woods in eastern Washington every day for the last week, stomping their way along the same path often enough that a solid trail was beginning to appear, making the journey a little easier. Lorena had the straps of a duffel bag looped over her shoulder, its contents consisting of a single item. An extremely important, rare, expensive, incredibly-difficult-to-create item that she'd guard with her life, if necessary.

The item was long, solid, and heavy, with a brass shell lined with dials and switches. A Chi'karda Drive was housed inside it—a complex network of chips, wires, and nanotech that could literally alter reality itself.

It was a Barrier Wand.

And the only hope she had of finding her son.

"If it doesn't work today," Lisa said as she ducked under the low-hanging branch of an oak tree, "I think we should try something else."

"Can't argue with that," Lorena responded. "I wanted to do this without getting George and the others involved, but we might not have a choice."

The two of them stepped across the forest floor, *cricks* and *cracks* filling the air along with the pungent smells of pine needles and bark and something else that wavered between sweet and rotten. Sunlight broke through the canopy of leaves and sprinkled the ground with golden drops.

"What do you have against Master George anyway?" Lisa asked.

Lorena almost stopped walking, but she caught herself and kept going. Did she really want to talk about her feelings toward the leader of the

Realitants right now? They were so complicated. “Nothing at all,” she finally said, a simple enough response.

“Come on, Mom. I know there’s something. I’m not quite as stupid as Tick always says I am.”

“Tick says no such thing!”

“Mom, answer the question.” Lisa pushed her way past a small branch and seemed to make no effort to keep it from swinging back and smacking Lorena in the face.

“Ouch!”

“Sorry.”

Lorena heard the girl snicker. “I’ll get you back for that, young lady.” She was glad her daughter couldn’t see the sudden smile that sprang up, but it couldn’t be helped. Lisa’s playfulness was a welcome thing indeed.

“So . . . answer the question.”

Lorena had no choice but to address the touchy subject. “As I said, I have nothing against that man whatsoever. If I did, not in a million years would I have let Atticus continue working for him and his merry group of heroes. It’s just complicated.”

“Then why haven’t we contacted him? Why aren’t we working together with him? He knows a lot more than we do!”

Lorena kept her doubts about that to herself. “I may be out of practice, but I’m no dummy when it comes to the Realities, you know.”

Lisa stopped and faced her mom. “I know, Mom, but don’t you think we could figure this out a lot faster if we had their help?”

“Maybe.” Lorena stepped closer to Lisa and reached out to grip the girl’s shoulders. “But I have my reasons. Number one, George has a heart of gold, but he can be reckless when times get . . . tense. That’s okay usually—but not when my son’s life is on the line like this.”

“And number two?”

Lorena gathered her thoughts for a second before answering. “The world’s in shambles, Lisa. All the natural disasters, all the deaths, all the homeless and sick, all the damage. And who knows what kind of permanent damage the other Realities have experienced. George and the Realitants are going to have a lot on their plate, and to be honest, I wouldn’t be able to blame them if Atticus wasn’t their top priority.”

“What? How can they—”

“He’s one boy, Lisa! One life. The Realitants have to worry about billions of others.”

“Then what are you saying?”

“I’m *saying* that even though George claims he’s going to do whatever it takes to find out what happened to Atticus, I can’t put my full trust and hope in that. We need to take it on ourselves to get this done. Do what we have to do, and let them do what *they* have to do.”

Lisa pursed her lips, obviously considering it all for a long moment. “Maybe it helps that two groups are coming at it from different directions. Only one of us needs to find him.”

“Bingo.” Lorena did her best to smile, but for some reason, her heart couldn’t make it feel genuine. Once again, speaking of the world and the trouble it was in had soured her mood; everything seemed worse since her son had vanished.

“So we go to the spot,” Lisa said, “and we try again.”

“Bingo times two.”

“And if it doesn’t work today, then we try something else.”

“Bingo times three.”

“Okay.” Lisa turned around and started walking again.

As Lorena followed, she thought for the millionth time that she was crazy to involve Lisa in this quest. Yes, she was endangering yet another of her children, but she couldn’t help it. Lisa was bright, and upbeat, and funny. Brave. And the girl loved her family as powerfully as Lorena did. She needed Lisa. Edgar—bless his heart—wasn’t the right person to help her now. And someone had to be with little Kayla.

Lorena *needed* Lisa. Desperately. She couldn’t do this alone. Lorena would just have to do whatever it took to keep the girl safe until they figured things out. Until Atticus was back together with them all.



They reached a clearing about twenty feet wide, their recent visits and footsteps and sit-downs having flattened the grass considerably. A circle of thick pines bordered the spot, the tree branches stretching to the sky far above. Lorena saw a squirrel scurry its way up one of the trees, dropping an acorn in its haste.

Lisa slipped off her backpack; she’d been in charge of the food because Lorena had to carry the heavy load of the Barrier Wand. They’d done this every day, and sharing a nice lunch put some cracks in the heavy dome of doom and gloom that hung over their mission. The two of them sat down in the middle of the clearing, facing each other.

“You want the turkey or the ham?” Lisa asked as she pulled out the sandwiches.

“Turkey. That ham’s been doing something awful to my stomach.”

“Thanks for sharing, Mom. My hunger just doubled.”

“Sorry, dear.”

They chomped through the meal, and then it was time to get down to business. Lorena unzipped the duffel bag and pulled out the hefty shaft of the Barrier Wand. The scant drifts of sunlight that filtered through the leaves glinted and winked off the shiny golden surface as she maneuvered the thing until she held it directly in front of her folded legs, its bottom end sunk into the debris of the forest floor. She looked past the Wand at Lisa.

“It’s a thing of beauty, don’t you think?”

Lisa shrugged. “Maybe the *first* time I saw it.”

“Oh, I never tire of it. Maybe it’s knowing the unimaginable power that’s coiled up inside of it. I’m a scientist, and yet it still feels like magic to me.”

“A cell phone would be magic if you showed it to somebody a hundred years ago.”

Lorena felt a burst of pride at the statement. “Well said, Lisa, well said. Just like Arthur C. Clarke.”

“Who?”

The pride bubble burst a bit. “Never mind.”

“Let’s do this thing.”

“Yes. Let’s do. I’m going to crank up the Chi’karda Drive to its highest level. We’ve got nothing to lose.”

Lisa didn’t answer right away, and Lorena saw a flicker of deep concern in the girl’s eyes.

“Don’t worry, Lisa. I don’t think it can hurt us. I’m more worried about it doing damage to the Wand itself.” Lorena didn’t know if that was the total truth, but it was close enough without planting even more worry inside her daughter.

“Go for it, then.”

Lorena spent a minute or two moving the dials and switches of the Wand, adjusting and flipping and turning each one until she was satisfied that its power was at maximum and that it was locked onto Atticus’s last known nanolocator readings.

She eyed Lisa. “This is it. If it doesn’t pull in that boy now, it never will. If you hear a loud buzz in your head or feel like your fingers might fall off, don’t be alarmed.”

“Of course not.” The slightest roll of Lisa’s eyes made her look half bored and half amused, but Lorena knew that fear still lurked behind it all.

“Want a countdown?”

“Mom!”

“Okay, okay. Here we go.” She reached for the button on the top of the Wand and pushed. The click was surprisingly loud, as if the entire forest and all its creatures had quieted at the same moment.

Nothing happened. At first. Then a low hum seemed to rise up out of the ground, along with a vibration that tickled Lorena’s legs, made her shift and scratch at the underside of her thighs. The noise rose in volume and depth, like giant tuning forks and gongs had been struck, the sound ringing all around them. Lorena’s eardrums rattled, and a pain cinched its way down her spine.

The world around them exploded into a swirl of gray mist and terrible, thunderous noise.



Concerns

Master George stood at the head of the table. He and the other Realitants were in the conference room of the Grand Canyon complex. George hadn't sat down since the meeting began, and he didn't know if he could. Sitting seemed like such a casual gesture, something done for rest and relaxation. How could he do that when the world—the *worlds*—were in such utter chaos?

"Been runnin' our lips for thirty minutes, we 'ave," Mothball was saying. Her stern expression made George incredibly sad. She hadn't smiled since Master Atticus had winked from existence. "And still not a flamin' thing done. Need to make some decisions, we do."

"Darn tootin' right," Sally added, the burly lumberjack of a man also looking gruffer than usual. "Get dem plans a'yorn hoppin' so we can quit gabbin' at each other. I'm downright sick of these here chat-and-chews."

Now it was Rutger's turn to speak up. "Look, you bunch of grumpy fusses—"

"That's enough," George interrupted. He hadn't needed to say it loudly or harshly. His little friend of so many years cut off and didn't argue. "Thank you. Just let me *think* for a second."

He looked around the room at Sato, Paul, and Sofia—the only other Realitants in attendance. Those three looked like youngsters who'd been thrown into the horrors of life far too early. And like people who'd lost a dear friend. Both of which were true. They sat slumped over, staring at the table, their faces turned toward the ground.

The other Realitants—people he'd worked with for countless years—couldn't afford to come to the meeting. They had too many problems to deal with in their own areas of responsibility. For now, this small group was all George had.

"Listen to me," George finally said. "I know that Master Atticus is on all of our minds. His . . . loss has put us on edge, and I don't believe we've said one nice thing to each other since he disappeared. But the world is in crisis, and we *must* meet our responsibilities. There are things we can do to help."

To say the world was in crisis was the understatement of the year. When Mistress Jane tried to sever the Fifth Reality with her new tool of dark matter, it had sent ripples of destruction throughout the universe, almost destroying it. Atticus seemed to have saved the day—or at least delayed the ultimate end—but the aftershocks were devastating.

Tornadoes, earthquakes, fires. Everywhere. Millions of people dead. The governments of the world were desperately trying to keep things under control and reach out to the hungry and wounded scattered all over.

Paul cleared his throat, and everyone looked at him. But before he spoke, his expression melted into something full of misery, and he sank back into his seat. Sofia reached out and squeezed his shoulder.

“Master Paul,” George began, but he found himself empty of words. He suddenly lost every ounce of leadership he’d ever had in his bones. Despair threatened to swallow him whole.

Sato—who was usually rather quiet—suddenly shot to his feet and slammed a fist down on the table. “Snap out of it!” he yelled. “We all need to snap out of it! Quit moping around like babies and start acting like Realitants. If Tick were here, he’d be ashamed of us.” He sat down, but his eyes burned as he gazed at each Realitant around him in turn. “I’ve got an army. The Fifth will do whatever they’re asked. Just say the word, and we can get started.”

George realized he was staring at the boy, transfixed. A spring of encouragement welled up inside him. “Thank you, Master Sato. I think we’d all agree that we needed that.”

“Just make a decision. Do something. Or we’ll go crazy.”

George nodded then straightened his posture, his strength returning. “You’re quite right, Sato. Quite right. Enough of our talk. Let’s go around the room and make assignments. It is indeed time to get to work. If something comes up that seems more important, then we’ll change those plans, but getting to work is our number one priority. Mothball, you first.”

The giant of a lady looked as if a little bit of life had been breathed back into her as well. “Alright, then. I’ll start winkin’ me way from one end to the other—not just in Reality Prime but all of ’em. Start makin’ reports and such. We don’t know much, now do we? Not with the communications so bloomin’ shot.”

“Excellent idea,” George said. “We need to determine exactly what’s happening or we’ll never know what direction to take in the long run.”

“Your middle name Danger all a sudden?” Sally cut in with his booming voice. “You plan to hightail it this way and that all by your lonesome, do ya? Not on my tickety-tock watch, you ain’t. I’ll go with Mothball.”

George loved the idea. “Perfect. Plans settled for two of us. Rutger, I

think we both know what you need to do.”

The fat little ball of a man shifted in his seat. “Um, well, I’d be happy to go on an adventure with my fine two friends, but . . . I seemed to have sprained my . . . elbow. Yes, yes, it’s giving me quite the fits lately . . .”

“Master Rutger, please.” George struggled to keep from laughing. “We all know very well that we need you here. Our instruments that survived the disasters have been reporting strange anomalies across the Realities. We need your keen researching mind devoted to solving that puzzle.”

Visible relief washed over Rutger’s features, but he tried to hide it with his words. “Oh, well, I guess you’re right, then. Pity. I would’ve gladly risked further injury to my elbow to help Mothball and Sally.”

“I have no doubt of it.”

“Didn’t know you could even see your elbow,” Mothball muttered. “What with all that natural padding.”

“Well, at least mine don’t jut out like pelican beaks!” Rutger countered. “Try gaining a pound or two so we quit thinking a skeleton rose up from the dead to scare the willies out of us.”

“Well, I would, now wouldn’t I, if you bloody let us have a bite or two at supper before you gobbled it all down that fat neck of yours.”

“Ah,” George said through a sigh. “This is more like it. If you two are going at it with each other, then at least *something* is right in the world.”

“What about us?” Sofia asked. It was the first time she’d spoken since the meeting began, and her soft voice was sad but strong. These new Realitants had life in them yet. “Our families are fine—we’ve checked on them, visited them—so we can do whatever you need us to do now.”

“Yeah,” Paul added, a little more spirit in his face too. “I can’t sit around this place one more second, listening to Rutger brag about his cooking and telling stupid jokes.”

George looked at Sato. “And you?”

The boy folded his arms across his chest. “I said I’m ready. And my army is too.”

“Okay, then.” George thought a moment. There were countless things that needed to be done throughout the Realities. Where to start? “Sato, I want you to go back to the Thirteenth Reality and destroy the remaining creatures that Jane manufactured at the Factory. We need to make sure that world is safe and back to the way it was meant to be.”

“Done,” Sato said immediately, without the slightest hint of fear.

“And . . . us?” Paul asked.

George put his hands on the table and leaned forward. “You two are going to pay a visit to a very old friend of mine. She lives in the Third Reality,

and we can only hope that she doesn't eat you for supper when you arrive."



Squishy Grass

Lisa screamed when it happened, but she couldn't hear her voice over the terrible sounds of thunder that pounded the air like detonating bombs. One second she'd been sitting in the forest, looking at her mom and the Barrier Wand, hearing a hum and feeling vibrations in her legs. The next, she'd been whipped into a tornado of swirling gray air, spinning, the world tilting all around her. The noises pounding her skull. She tried to find her mom—at least *see* her—but there was nothing. Only a gray whirlpool of smoke.

And then it ended. Abruptly.

Lisa's body slammed onto soft, squishy ground. She immediately felt moisture seeping through her clothes and jumped to her feet—which was a bad idea. Her mind was still recovering from whatever she'd just been through and dizziness twirled inside of her until she fell right back down. She was lying on a huge field of grass, saturated with rain. Heavy clouds hung in the sky above her, making the day seem dark.

Her mom was close, the Barrier Wand in her lap. She sat up and stared at Lisa, dazed.

“What . . . ?” Lisa began.

“I have no idea,” her mom replied. “All I did was try to latch on to Atticus's nanolocator and pull him in. It shouldn't have sent *us* somewhere else.”

“Well, unless we went back in time to before trees grew in Deer Park, it sent us *somewhere*. We were sitting in the woods about three minutes ago.”

Lisa hated the feeling of the wet grass soaking her pants, so she tried standing again, this time much slower. Her legs wobbled a bit, and the endless sea of grass tilted a few times, but soon she was steady.

She turned in a slow circle, taking in the view of the place to which they'd been winked. Super green grass stretched in every direction, running down a slope toward a stream that splashed and sparkled as it cut across a rocky bed. On the other side of the stream, trees dotted the land, growing thicker and taller until they became a huge forest. There was no sign of civilization anywhere.

“Mom?”

“Yeah?”

“Where in the world are we?”



Three hours of searching didn't answer that question.

They walked together to the stream, crossed over at a narrow spot where large rocks jutted out of the rushing waters, then explored the other side. They eventually made their way to where the trees thickened into a dark, ominous forest. They'd found no clues or signs of life—human, anyway—and when they stood at the wall of pines and oaks, it was almost as if they were stopped by an invisible barrier.

“Why can't I get myself to go any farther?” Lisa asked.

Her mom's answer didn't help. “Because we're in a strange land, and there might be hideous monsters in there.”

“Good point. Let's just walk around the edge of it; maybe we'll stumble across something eventually.”

“As good a plan as any.”

They set off, Lisa right behind her mom, who still hefted the golden rod of the Barrier Wand in her hands.

“Tell me more about the old days,” Lisa said. The clouds still churned above, dark and heavy, but it had yet to rain again. At least the air was nice and cool.

“The old days?” her mom repeated.

“Yeah. You used to be a Realitant. How'd you go from that to being a stay-at-home mom? Seems kind of lame.”

“Lame? You wish you had a different woman stomping around the house telling you what to do?”

Lisa snickered at the image. “No, you're way too good at it. It's just . . . being a Realitant seems so cool and adventurous. What happened to make you give it up?”

The land started to rise up, and the walk was getting a little harder. Lisa saw the crest of the rise a few hundred feet ahead. She hoped they'd see something there. Something helpful. Her mom still hadn't answered.

“You awake up there?” she asked her.

“Oh, I'm awake. I'm just thinking about your question. It's more complicated than you know. It's making me remember a lot of things, and I'm not even sure where to start explaining.”

“How'd you join them? How'd they recruit you?”

Her mom laughed softly. “It wasn’t much different from how they recruited Atticus. Some letters, clues, and riddles. It was kind of easy, actually.”

“How long were you a member?”

“About four years, maybe a little longer. It wasn’t all the exciting adventure you think it was—and nothing like what our poor boy has gone through—except for . . .” She trailed off, and there was something dark in her words, like the storm that brewed far above them.

Lisa pushed her. “Except for what?”

“I wasn’t actually there, but I was still technically a Realitant when . . . when Sato’s parents were killed. Mistress Jane had been getting more and more suspicious. Acting weird. And it all came to a head that night, when she started using the powers she’d stolen from the Thirteenth. She crossed a line, and Sato’s mom and dad paid the price for standing up to it. Nearly all of them there that night did.”

“What happened?”

“Jane burned that poor boy’s parents to death.” She said it so simply, but the words were horrible enough. “I didn’t know the world could be so evil. I wanted out. I’m ashamed in many ways—for abandoning the Realitants, abandoning my friends—but I don’t regret it. There’s a difference, you know. I chose my family, and I’ve never once regretted that.”

Lisa felt guilty, like she’d stirred up feelings her mom didn’t deserve to have. “Well, Tick and I are glad you did. And think about it—if you hadn’t done such a good job of raising him, he would’ve been a stinky Realitant instead of a *good* Realitant, and he wouldn’t have saved the world. See? Makes perfect sense.”

“You’re a sweet little thing,” her mom replied.

“Yeah, I know. I’ve gotta have *some* way of making sure I stay your favorite.”

They reached a sudden rise in the slope that was steeper than before, which made Lisa feel even stronger that some kind of revelation waited on the other side.

She trotted ahead to pull even with her mom, who hadn’t slowed a bit. “We better be careful,” she whispered. “There might be something over this hill that we don’t want to see us.”

Her mom nodded. “You’ve got the caution of a Realitant. Maybe old George will make you one after we save Atticus and bring him home.”

“Maybe. Come on.”

Lisa dropped to her knees and started crawling up the steep rise. Her mom crawled right next to her, holding the Barrier Wand awkwardly on her

shoulder.

“You want me to take a turn with that?” Lisa asked.

“No, thanks. I made this one, and I want to keep it nice and close right now.”

“When did you make it?”

“I’ll tell you later.”

They reached the top of the hill, where the land flattened for a couple of feet then dropped again, plummeting down another slope to the land beyond. When she saw what awaited them, Lisa forgot she was supposed to be careful, and she poked her head up, gawking so that anyone within miles could see her if they looked hard enough.

In the middle of a flat plain, there was a castle. Half of it had been destroyed, with stone and rock and wood collapsed in heaps around the edges of the destruction. Black figures crawled over the ruins like ants.

“What *are* those things?” Lisa whispered.

Her mom answered in a deadened voice. “Creatures of the Thirteenth Reality. Creatures of Mistress Jane. Just as Atticus described them.” She turned to Lisa, her face pale. “How did we end up *here*?”



Poor Mr. Chu

Tick sat on a rock and stared at the ocean.

Though it wasn't any normal ocean. The color of it changed about every three minutes, going from blackish-blue to red to orange, morphing in waves as though someone flew along the surface, spilling huge buckets of food coloring. Fish leaped out of the waters, but sometimes land animals did as well. Deer. Lions. Elephants.

The Nonex made no sense whatsoever. And things seemed to be growing even more unstable lately, sharp upticks in the madness. Like the thumping sound and earthquake attack of the day before. It was all a mixed soup for the senses, and it was beginning to make Tick want to hit somebody. Namely a grumpy, arrogant man named Reginald Chu.

Tick hated the man. Far more than he hated Mistress Jane, for whom he still felt an enormous amount of guilt—he'd scarred the woman for life, after all. And despite her evil ways, she'd shown moments where she doubted the path she'd chosen. If anything, Tick had driven her more toward the darkness.

But Chu was different. The man seemed crazy, and crazy wasn't an excuse for being bad. Every single thing he said or did pointed to one thing for him—power. Dominating others. Ruling. Just the other night, the three of them had been sitting around a fire, talking about theories on how they could make it back to Reality Prime. The conversation hadn't lasted ten minutes before Chu went off about how they needed to hurry, take some risks, because he might be losing his stranglehold on the Fourth Reality. With all the destruction and chaos happening, he feared someone else might be trying to take over what had once been his.

Tick had stared him in the eyes and told him to shut up. And Chu did. Which made Tick feel like king of the world, at least for a little while.

Jane and Chu were scared of him; Tick had no doubt about that. He'd shown them that he had more control of his powers over Reality and quantum physics—lifting firewood, igniting fires, making the sand leap into the air and swirl into shapes—than ever before. One time, as a joke, he levitated Chu, spinning him in a circle a few times. Even Jane had laughed, and when Chu

came crashing back to the ground with a loud flump and a grunt, Tick had expected the man to be enraged. But instead, he simply stood up, brushed himself off, and told Tick he hoped the boy would come work for him some day, that a boy with such power was destined to do great things.

That was Chu, though. Always thinking about power. Always planning his next step to world domination. What a big, fat jerk. Tick didn't like the feeling that such hatred gave him—like his insides were rotting—but he couldn't help it.

There was the crack of a broken twig in the woods behind Tick. He turned to see Chu leaning out from behind a tree, staring at him.

“That’s kind of creepy,” Tick said. “Spying on a little boy like that.”

“Spying?” Chu replied. “What exactly am I spying on? You sitting like a frog on a log, staring at nothing? We’re wasting time. Jane agrees with me.”

Chu walked out of the woods and approached Tick, coming to stand next to him. Tick didn't bother standing up or offering to slide over for the man to sit down.

“What exactly would you want me to be doing right now?” Tick asked him, returning his gaze to the ocean, which had turned a pinkish color.

“Building us a log cabin so we’ll have a place to mope about while we’re stuck here?”

“We need your power, and you know it. Jane is willing to take some risks. You should be too. We’re all getting a little crazier with every passing day. We need to *do* something!” The man’s voice had risen with each word until he was shouting.

Tick stood up and faced him. “I know. We’ll do it when I’m ready. I trust my instincts a lot more than I do your mad desire to get back and stomp on people. *Chill*. Please.”

Chu looked utterly stunned, and it was a beautiful thing to see. Tick had to hold back the smile that wanted to leap across his face. He almost felt sorry for Chu, and decided to throw him a bone, out of guilt.

“Tomorrow,” he said, sitting back down. “We’ll try something tomorrow.”



Tricks on the Beach

Things had changed for Tick when he battled Mistress Jane outside the Factory in the Thirteenth Reality. They'd changed drastically.

He'd been driven by pure and absolute desperation. He'd done what he needed to do for the Haunce, healing the damage done by Jane that would've ended Reality and the universe. And when he'd had to fight Jane afterwards, he'd known more than ever that death was his reward if he messed up. Though maybe he'd learned some things from the Haunce that he hadn't realized.

When he and Mistress Jane were going at each other like two wizards settling a centuries-old spat, Tick's mind had been focused on his Chi'karda like never before, channeling it, funneling it, *understanding* it. He didn't really know how he knew—he could never sit down and write a book about it or explain it to someone—it was like walking or running or breathing. Things just clicked, and suddenly he *knew* how to do it. His body and instincts and mind all worked together to use the Chi'karda and manipulate the world of quantum physics. He felt like a magician. A magician of science.

And it was *fun*.

Now it was early the next day, when he'd promised Chu they'd try to get out of the Nonex, and Tick had spent the morning out on the beach, practicing his new abilities. He had stacked three logs vertically, end to end, pointing toward the sky. He used his mind and pushed out with his senses, touching the strings and pulleys of the unseen particles of science. Carefully, he moved one, and then another one. The tower stood thirty or forty feet in the air.

"Impressive," Chu said. "Really. Can we get on with it and do something that actually matters now?"

Tick suddenly had an image pop in his head of Chu's giant mountain palace, and how bad things had gone there. That was where Tick had hurt Jane, where he had almost died. Sofia had risked her life to save him. Remembering it again made Tick angry.

He shifted his thoughts and pushed his Chi'karda. The stacked logs flew through the air and shot toward Chu like spears. He cried out and started to

run, but Tick was one step ahead of him, turning the logs vertical again and slamming them into the ground in a circle around Chu. He was in a prison, the logs thick enough and close enough together that he couldn't squeeze between them.

"Stop acting like a child!" Chu screamed, facing Tick with rage burned into his expression. "Take these things down! Now!"

Tick looked over at Jane, whose red mask had tilted up slightly in a smile. Her yellow robe and hood stirred in the slight breeze of the day, and images of her past deeds popped into Tick's mind as well. He almost used his Chi'karda to throw some things at her, too, but remembered that she could fight back.

Maybe it *was* time for Tick to quit acting like a brat. He didn't feel like himself lately. They needed to get out of the Nonex. Not just for his own life, but so he could see what was going on back at home. His family and friends could be in danger, maybe even dead. The thought made his heart sink. He'd already tried winking a message to them, but it didn't work.

"Atticus," Chu said, obviously trying to remain calm. "Please. I don't want to interfere with your powers. I'm not an idiot. But I know you want to get out of this place just as much as I do. I can't go back and change the past, but—"

"Shut up!" Tick yelled. He didn't know where all this anger was coming from. "I don't want to hear any lame apologies from you. We all know you're planning to go right back to doing what you do if we get back to the Realities. Well, guess what? I'm not going to let you. So keep that in mind."

Before Chu could respond, Tick exploded the logs, breaking down their substance into millions of tiny splinters and swirling them away in a cloud of wooden mist. He purposefully let a few splinters nick Chu in the face and arms. The man cried out again and gingerly touched the sore spots. Guilt immediately racked Tick, mixed with a little bit of satisfaction.

"Tick," Mistress Jane began in her scratchy, painful voice. "Preach all you want about what we've done in our past. But look at yourself. You're heading down the same road. Maybe you should have waited until you could control your power before you started judging others. Power is a . . . powerful thing. I don't know how else to put it."

Her words made Tick even angrier. "Don't you dare say that. I would never—*never*—use my power to hurt other people like you have."

Jane's mask smiled broadly. "Then what did you just do to Reginald?"

Tick looked sharply at the man, who had several spots of blood on his face and arms. He wanted to get defensive, explain that he was just giving Chu some of his own medicine, but a small part of him knew that Jane was

right. No one was born thinking they'd rule the world someday. It developed in baby steps, a slippery slope. He had to be careful.

"He deserves every bad thing that could ever happen to him," Tick said, defiant. "But I won't do something like that again. I promise."

"Yeah, right," Chu responded, glaring at him. "You just wait, kid. Wait until you start to feel the joy of being stronger than someone else. You'll be working beside me before you turn twenty years old. That's a guarantee."

Tick looked at him without answering.

"Let's get to work," Jane said. "Nothing matters if we can't get back to the real world."

Tick felt a little lost right then. A little confused. And scared at what might happen when they started messing with Reality on a big scale. He decided to set everything aside and quit thinking for a while. They had nothing to lose, and he could deal with his feelings about what Jane had said later.

"Okay." Tick pointed down the beach at the campfire that had become their central meeting spot. "Let's go sit down."

"And we're not standing up again until we're in a different Reality," Chu said as he started walking that way. "I can't stand one more day in this place."

Tick and Jane exchanged a glance. She said nothing, her mask melting into a blank expression, and Tick wondered what was going on inside her head. He shrugged, and then the two of them followed Chu to the campfire.

They sat on the stumpy logs they'd brought out on the first day, circling the small flames that spit and hissed as they burned. The fire smelled good, and Tick remembered campouts with his family. The memory hurt his heart, and he swore to do just as Chu had said. They needed to get out of the Nonex.

"We've talked for hours about every theory in the book," Chu said. "Time to put up or shut up, as they say. What are we going to try?"

Tick had listened to every conversation they'd had in the Nonex, and he understood most of them. Master George had made him study pretty much every science book ever written. But none of it seemed to matter right then. The only thing he trusted was his instinct.

He realized Jane was talking, but he'd completely tuned out. Feeling a sudden boldness and certainty, he interrupted her.

"I know what we need to do."



One Question

Paul had been waiting for this day for a long time. A mission for the Realitants for which he was in charge. Of course, Sofia probably thought *she* was the boss, and he'd let her keep thinking that, but he knew the truth.

This was Paul's time.

Master George had ushered them into his little office, where they sat on a small couch, and he was perched on a wooden chair with his Barrier Wand balanced on top of his lap. He had a grave look on his face, which was business as usual since the whole world had fallen into chaos.

"Are you both ready?" the old man asked.

Paul nodded.

Sofia cleared her throat. "Of course we are. But you haven't really told us much about what we're supposed to do."

Their fearless leader pursed his lips, looking as if he had a whole bunch of nasty thoughts in his head that he didn't want to share. "The Third Reality is one we haven't charted very well, and, given recent events, we've lost all other means of communication with the Realitant we originally sent there. She can be quite . . . difficult, and she's made it clear that supervising the Third Reality is her job and her job alone. I need you to find her and ask her a very important question."

"You said something about her wanting to eat us," Paul said. "This chick a wolverine or something?"

"No, no, no," Master George grumbled. "And I highly suggest you not say such things to her when you meet. And most certainly, I recommend you not call her a . . . what did you say? A chick?"

Paul shrugged. He wasn't worried—he'd have this lady cooling her jets with some of his simple charm and good looks. No biggie.

"I think I'll do the talking," Sofia muttered. "Don't worry."

"Her name is Gretel," Master George continued. "The woman has a nasty temper, the worst I've ever seen. She makes Mistress Jane look like a princess on a pony. And she's been a bit . . . at odds with me for some time now. But

she's brilliant, and I plan to send you with full means to communicate back to me through your nanolocators. Your first task is to reach her. Make sure she is calm. And then ask the question."

Paul thought the whole mission seemed a little strange. "What's this big question we're supposed to ask?"

Their leader hefted the Barrier Wand in his hands and studied it, though his gaze was distant, as though he was trying to stall for time.

"Well?" Paul pushed.

"You may not understand it, but I need you to say these exact words to her. Are you ready? Though short, I've taken the liberty of writing it down on pieces of paper I've slipped into your packs."

"Sheesh," Paul said. "Just spill it already."

"Here it is," the man said, looking very serious indeed. "Six words: *May I please use your bathroom?*"



Paul was still snickering about the ridiculous question when the old man winked them to the Third Reality. Master George had refused to explain any further, saying that those six words were all they needed to know. They'd be sent to a place near a path. Follow the path. Find a house. Knock on the door. Ask the question: "May I please use your bathroom?"

Easy peasy.

Well, worst-case scenario, they'd be able to utilize the facilities before heading back.

Paul and Sofia stood on a soggy, muddy trail that cut ahead of them through marshland and swamp. The air was muggy and seemed to stick in Paul's lungs when he breathed, and the heat made it worse. They'd only been there for half a minute, and he was already sweating head to toe.

Trees rose up out of the black waters of the swamp, moss and vines hanging from their branches. There were the sounds of frogs and crickets and a million other bugs and creatures, and a fragrance that was an inch short of disgusting. Rotten eggs and burnt toast.

"Let me get this straight," Paul said. "This lady could live pretty much anywhere in the thirteen Realities, and she chose to live here?"

Sofia had her annoyed look set firmly on her face. "Do you even listen when Master George talks? He said that she was sent here to study this Reality. That's why she lives here."

"And this whole world is a swamp? I'm pretty sure they have a mountain or two somewhere. A sweet forest dig. A *desert* would be better than this."

"I just hope Master George didn't send us here so we'd be out of the

way.”

Paul snorted. “You kidding? He probably figured we’d drunk a ton of water, so here we are—waiting to ask if we can use this lady’s bathroom.”

“I wonder who died here, or how many,” was Sofia’s reply.

Sometimes she chose to ignore his comments as her best line of defense. Paul didn’t mind. “Maybe there was a battle or something. It sure isn’t a graveyard.”

“It looks like the path starts here and goes in that direction.” She pointed down the long trail, which wound its way through the nasty, steaming marshland.

“I bet we get bitten by mosquitos the size of my dad’s truck.”

“Probably.”

“We’ll get malaria and die.”

“Probably.”

“Okay. Let’s go.”



They reached Gretel’s house about ten minutes later.

It was the exact kind of place Paul expected would be in the middle of a swamp. Old, moss-covered wood, the sideboards of the small cottage warped from too much moisture. Faded, worn paint that used to be white. A screen door that was half off its hinges. A porch that looked like it was about to collapse. The biggest trees they’d seen yet surrounded the place.

Paul had sworn to himself that he wouldn’t make any Hansel and Gretel jokes since he’d first heard the woman’s name from Master George, but he couldn’t resist.

“We forgot to drop pieces of bread on our way here.”

Sofia gave him a fake courtesy laugh. “I was waiting for that.”

“Comedy never works when it’s obvious.”

Sofia flashed him a smile that *wasn’t* fake, and Paul broke out in goose bumps. He hoped she couldn’t tell. He started walking toward the porch to hide it.

When he reached the steps of the porch, he couldn’t help but hesitate. It seemed as if their feet would crash right through if they dared take one step on the old, rotten boards. But before he could take that first step, the front door tore open with a bang. The screen that had barely been hanging on fell off completely. It clanged against the porch, bent and torn.

An old, old woman stood in the doorway, a huge knife in one hand and a pistol in the other. Paul yelped and backed away. He ran into Sofia, and they both collapsed to the soggy ground.

Gretel moved forward, the boards creaking under her feet. She had gray hair springing in all directions, a face as wrinkled as a newborn pup, and a tattered dress that looked as if it hadn't been washed in years. But her body seemed strong, solid. Especially the fingers gripped around those two weapons.

“How dare old Georgy Porgy send two *rats* here to nibble on my cheese,” she said, her voice low but somehow full of venom. “I told him what would happen if he did that. I sure did. Death, true and true.”

The old lady lifted her pistol and aimed it at Paul's face.



A Dusty Road

Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!” Paul shouted, holding his hands up as he got to his feet. Sofia did the same next to him. “You haven’t heard why we came yet!”

Gretel cocked the old silver pistol and took a step forward. She kept the barrel pointed directly at Paul. “Don’t need hearing your nonsense, boy. I’m here for a reason, and that reason is more important than two pipsqueak babies begging for their lives on my lawn.”

Paul’s immediate instinct was to tell her she was crazy for calling the mud and weeds on which they stood a *lawn*. Luckily, Sofia spoke up before he could, as calm and collected as a sheriff in an old Western movie.

“You want to shoot us, Gretel? Go right ahead. But you’ll need to answer our question before you do.”

Her words took the lady aback a little, as it did Paul. Was this really the time to ask if they could use her bathroom? Then again, Paul thought it was the dumbest thing he’d ever heard come out of George’s mouth anyway.

“A question, you say?” Gretel responded. “You say you have a question for me?”

“That’s right,” Sofia said. “Just one. May I please use your bathroom?”

The old woman swung her gun away from Paul and pointed it off somewhere in the distance. She pulled the trigger, and a boom rocked the air and smoke puffed up from the gun. Gretel spun the pistol on her finger like a cowboy and smiled, her teeth looking like they’d chewed one too many chicken bones throughout the years.

“Yes, you may, my darling,” she said. “Yes, you may. Do come in.”

Sofia glanced back at Paul, who shrugged. They both headed up the steps of the rickety old porch.



Mothball had always prided herself on being a nice, genuine person who could see the good in everyone. Yes, she loved to tease and rib, but deep down she had a heart of gold, soft and snuggly and warm. At least, that’s what

she liked to think.

But Sally irritated the living jeppers out of her. How in the bloody tarnations had she ended up with *him* on this mission? The man was like a walking bullhorn, he was.

“So, Miss Purty Legs,” he said as they walked down a long country road in the Twelfth Reality. “Whatcha thinkin’ this old bag of cornfeed’s gonna help us with?”

“Don’t know as yet,” she replied. “Just hopin’ I can hear a bloody word that comes out of his mouth over your yappin’ tongue. No offense, of course.”

Sally bellowed his deep, booming laugh. “None taken, missy. None taken. You should be used to yappin’ after hanging out with that friend a’yorn. Rutger could talk the ear off an elephant.”

Mothball couldn’t help it—she laughed too. Sally always knew how to make her smile eventually. “The wee little fat man can talk, no doubt about it.”

“Anyhoo, why we startin’ with this farm boy again?”

Though she could swear she’d already explained this to him, Mothball did so again. “He’s not really a Realitant, but he’s a friend of ours. Lives out in the boonies so as he can keep tabs better without worryin’ over communications and such. Watches over the world, he does. Has every satellite and radio and cell service you can dream up in this quaint little Reality. We pay him right nicely, too. He’ll know what the goings-on are about.”

“*Goings-on are about?*” Sally repeated. “What the heckamajibber does that mean?”

“We need to find what’s the trouble here. We’re on a research mission, silly bones. Clean out them bloody ears, would ya? Master George explained it all right nicely. Gathering information, we are.”

“Well, I sho ’nuff knew that! I’m just tryin’ to figger out how you people speak in them fancy lands a’yorn.”

“I know the feeling,” Mothball muttered under her breath.

They reached a dusty old mailbox on the side of the road with the word “Tanner” printed on the side in faded black letters. A long, gravel driveway cut through a cornfield before disappearing into a grove of trees about a half a mile away.

“Here we are,” Mothball said. “He’s waiting for us I ’spect.”

Thankfully Sally didn’t say another word as they started walking down the long driveway.



Rutger sat in front of his huge screen, reviewing all the data he'd gathered from the instruments spread throughout the Realities. The ones that had survived the destruction, anyway.

He missed Mothball.

Yes, she was a tall sack of bones who took every chance she got to make fun of him. But she was also his best friend, and he hated thinking of her out there without him, especially considering how dangerous things had become. A world suffering from chaos that you *can't* help breeds chaos that you *can*. The thieves and looters and murderers would be out in full force now that the police, firemen, and other authorities were occupied with search and rescue.

Of course, Mothball was a tough old bear. She'd be fine.

He began scrolling through the data—everything from weather reports to measurements of quantum anomalies in atmosphere particle waves. The data was haywire, still settling from the massive disruptions caused by that red-faced Mistress Jane and her attempt to sever the Fifth Reality from existence. What a disaster that had been, saved only by the inexplicable powers of Master Tick. However, it seemed as if saving the universe from one final and all-ending catastrophe had created lots of smaller ones.

Something caught his eye.

He zoomed in to take a look at one of the measuring stations located in an old forest in the Third Reality; a box of instruments had been left there almost a decade ago. There'd been an absolute *flurry* of activity there just a couple of days earlier, spiking the Chi'karda levels through the roof. And then it had ended abruptly, going from immeasurably high to zero in an instant. Rutger read through it all, trying his best to interpret what it could mean.

He noticed that the information had an attachment: a photograph. Many of the instrument boxes had cameras installed nearby, but Rutger was surprised to see that something had been taken and sent before whatever had happened to end the data flow. The box had to have been destroyed eventually.

He was so anxious that his fat fingers hit the wrong key twice, but he finally opened up the attached picture.

There were trees—lots of them. And down the middle of the photo, a gash, as if someone had painted over the forest scene with an image of a beach. And on that beach was Mistress Jane, looking toward the camera with her menacing red mask. Over her shoulder, standing a ways behind her in the sand, was another figure.

Rutger quickly zoomed in, leaning forward to get a better look. His gasp echoed throughout the entire Realitant headquarters.

It was Tick.



Probing

The air around Tick hummed.

He, Chu, and Mistress Jane had been holding hands for more than an hour, eyes closed, the campfire slowly dying. Tick could barely hear the last flickers of its flames over the thrumming sound that came from the Chi'karda that burned between the three linked humans. Anyone who might have observed the group from afar would have seen a massive cloud of tiny orange lights, a fiery mist that churned and boiled around them.

Chu, of course, had no power whatsoever over the realm of quantum physics. He had never known any kind of power unless it was manufactured with technology. But Tick and Jane were a different story. They both had control over the mysterious force that ruled all existence—Jane, because she'd been forever melded with the largest Barrier Wand ever created, and Tick, because of reasons no one had quite figured out yet. Master George had merely said he was on to something that might explain it and that it involved soulkens.

But they'd never really had a chance to talk about it, had they?

Tick couldn't allow his mind to wander. He pushed away the thoughts trying to barrel their way in and focused on the task at hand. Escaping the Nonex.

Jane and Chu had agreed to his plan without argument. It seemed they both had grown desperate to get out and were willing to rely on Tick's idea. He had, after all, worked directly with the Haunce and saved the entire universe.

And that's what Tick was banking on. Mistress Jane had channeled her Chi'karda—every last drop that she could muster—into Tick for him to use as he needed. Tick had gathered it in, mixing it with his own until he had more of the natural force around him—and within him—than any human should be able to endure. A few weeks ago it would've killed him instantly.

But he had learned so much.

The Chi'karda raged. It was pure power, collected into one place like a newborn star ready to explode with heat and energy. But Tick kept it at bay,

probed it, felt it, soothed it in some way. The feel of it was pure and clean, like an inferno burning inside his chest.

He didn't know exactly what he was looking for, but he had a good idea. A sense more than anything. Tick felt like someone was standing right behind him, just inches away. His eyes couldn't see them, but he knew someone was there all the same.

The Haunce had taught him a valuable lesson. Reality spoke to you in interesting ways—not in the formulas and equations of mathematicians and scientists, nor in the dry, lengthy descriptions found in dusty old textbooks. Reality was on another level altogether, at one with our minds. It spoke to you in the best way your own self can speak back. And that's what Tick wanted as he probed things he didn't understand with the power of Chi'karda.

He was looking for a riddle.



Lorena Higginbottom knew her stuff.

She'd suspected from the very second they'd appeared on that rain-slicked grass that her Barrier Wand had winked her and Lisa into the Thirteenth Reality. Something about the smell and feel of the place had been her first clue. The big forest—with no signs of technology or civilization around—had been her next clue. And then, when they'd stumbled up to the top of that ridge and had seen Mistress Jane's ruined castle, any remaining doubt had vanished.

She knew that castle because she'd been there before. Just once. But that had been enough.

Now it was a collapsed shell of its former self, broken and crumbled. Fangen and other creatures swarmed what still stood, but they were too far away to know exactly what they were doing. But if she could help it, Lorena wouldn't take her daughter one step closer to find out.

They'd sneaked back down the hill until the castle was out of sight and entered the outskirts of the forest they'd been trying to avoid. They needed cover, and time to think. The dark depths of the woods chilled her, though, and she kept a wary eye out for intruders.

"So what are we going to do?" Lisa asked. They'd been whispering back and forth for a while now, but no solid plan had solidified yet.

"Well, like I said," Lorena answered, "my first instinct is to get ourselves back to that place we winked into and get out of this scary Reality."

"But?" Lisa prodded.

"But there has to be *some* reason we were pulled here. I was trying to isolate Atticus's nanolocator, pushing the Chi'karda levels to the extreme, and

somehow, instead of bringing him to us, it brought us here.”

“But why?”

Lorena had to refrain from giving her daughter an impatient look. “Well, dear, that’s what I think we need to figure out. If we just wink back home, we’ll never know.”

Lisa opened her mouth to answer, but she didn’t say anything as a sound came from deeper in the woods, like the whoosh of wind blowing through an open door.

Lorena searched the darkness between the trees but saw no sign of movement. The strange noise stopped after several seconds.

She and Lisa didn’t say anything—they didn’t need to. They were in the Thirteenth Reality, after all, a couple of miles from Mistress Jane’s castle. Caution had already been strong, and now things were on full alert. They both stood up, slowly and quietly, reaching out to take each other’s hand. Lorena held the Wand in her free hand, ready to club something if she had to. The Chi’karda levels weren’t quite high enough to wink away from where they were.

Something crunched up ahead. Twigs cracked on the ground. Then again. And again. There was no sign of the source of the sound, but it was coming closer.

“Just step away,” Lorena whispered. “Quickly now.”

They faced the forest as they began to walk backwards, their footsteps also crunching through the underbrush. Lisa’s hand was shaking, and sweat slicked her palm. The noises continued, but Lorena *still* couldn’t see who was approaching. The mystery stranger picked up its pace, heading for them. The time for caution was gone.

“Run, Lisa!” she barked. “Run!”

She turned and yanked on Lisa’s hand, pulling her along as she sprinted for the grassy hill outside the fringe of the woods.

Their pursuer picked up its pace to catch them, but then the sound of footsteps abruptly ceased, replaced by that whooshing sound again. A wind rose up into the air and over their heads, the noise of it making Lorena scream and look skyward.

When she saw what hovered above them, she cried out again and collapsed to the ground, pulling Lisa down with her. She rolled onto her back and stared at the thing that had come after them.

It was a creature with slanted, burning yellow eyes, its body made of what looked like ropes of gray smoke, coiled together to make a long body with arms and legs. It flew through the air, darting back and forth above them like a hawk examining its prey. Another smoky creature flew out of the forest

to join its haunted companion. They circled, their yellow eyes leaving streaks of light in the air.

Lorena was frozen in place, squeezing her daughter's hand and holding the Wand to her chest.

The two wispy creatures abruptly flew down to the ground and grabbed Lorena and Lisa by their arms. Gripping them strongly, they lifted them to their feet with a painful jerk. And then they started marching the two terrified ladies back toward the slope of the hill.

Back toward the castle.



A Pond in the Snow

The stairs hadn't broken when Paul walked up them, nor had the porch collapsed, potentially dropping them into a heap of spiders and snakes and rats. There'd been a lot of creaks and groans, but he and Sofia had made it to the front door and through it unscathed.

The inside of Gretel's home looked nothing like the outside. As soon as Paul stepped through the door, he knew that the dilapidated exterior of the shack was a disguise, something to make thieves and thugs figure they might as well not bother. He and Sofia stood in a lushly carpeted living room with fancy furniture—all leather and frilly carved wood—and portraits of grim-looking people on the walls. A fire crackled in a brick fireplace, and the air smelled of cinnamon.

"Nice place you got here," Paul said. "I'm glad you didn't shoot us or stab us before we got a chance to check it out."

Sofia elbowed Paul in the ribs. "Thank you for inviting us in. That's what my rude friend meant to say."

Gretel looked back and forth between her two visitors, her tongue cocked inside one of her cheeks as she examined them. "George and I've always had an arrangement. You kids understand? What I'm doing here is too important to let any jackawillie barge in here and mess with my stuff. He promised to never tell anyone that the password question was a test, and to never give it out unless it was serious business. Serious, serious business. I reckon we have things to talk about."

Sofia nodded. "Yes, we do."

"I don't think we know *what* we're supposed to talk about," Paul said. "Could you help us out with that?"

The old lady grinned again, showing her gnarly teeth. "George wouldn't have sent ya with that question unless it was something particular. The whole reason I'm here in the first place. And let me guess—you're here because of the earthquake I had."

"Yes!" Sofia answered.

Paul suspected that the lady didn't know the extent of the damage to all the Realities yet; she obviously wasn't communicating with anyone on a regular basis. "How bad was it?" he asked her.

"Shook me right out of my bed, I can tell you that. Ruined my dream about Clark Gable, too. I was half in a tizzy, grabbed my gun and shot a bullet straight through my roof. Thing *still* drips. Don't listen to that nonsense about how duct tape can fix anything and everything."

Paul was really starting to like this woman. "Who's Clark Gable?"

"Never you mind. Now have a seat, enjoy the flames. I'll be back with some warm milk and cookies." She started walking toward the kitchen.

"You *do* know it's really hot outside, right?" Paul asked as he and Sofia took a seat on a leather couch. They sank half a foot into the deep cushions.

Gretel turned to face them. "Yes, son. But I'm old, and old people get cold even if they're in a desert. Plus, the things we're going to talk about today are gonna chill us right to the bone. I think we both know that."

She slipped into the kitchen before they could respond.



Tick was in a trance.

He felt like an oracle from ancient times, going through a ritual to call down the rain. He still held hands with Chu and Jane, but he was barely aware of it. Eyes squeezed shut, he saw only a dark swirl of orange and black in his vision, and the air hummed heavily with the power of Chi'karda. His skin prickled with chills and sweat at the same time.

He'd been at it for hours, poking the depths of Reality with his senses, looking for something to represent a way out of the Nonex. He felt like an astronaut in deep space, slinging himself from one galaxy to the next, sending out probes to see if he might capture the right data he needed. He'd been on the verge of giving up—his muscles aching, his mind exhausted—when he finally found what he'd been searching for.

A doorway. A portal in the darkness, framed by that eerie orange light.

He mentally flew towards it. The opening expanded, growing larger and larger as he approached. Everything was symbolic now, and he went with what came. His body—his conscience, his imagination, his thoughts—catapulted through the portal, and suddenly the air exploded with light. He closed his eyes. He no longer felt the hands or presence of his two partners, even though he knew they were still there. Until this was over, Tick was on his own.

His feet touched a hard surface, and within his mind, he opened his eyes again.

He stood in a field of white snow. The sky above him was a piercingly clear blue, and the sun shone down with all its power, reflecting off the whiteness with a brilliant light that he'd first felt when entering the portal that had brought him here. He turned in a circle and saw that there was absolutely nothing in any direction. Just flat land and snow as far as he could see.

If anything could symbolize the Nonex, this was it.

There was one thing. Off in the distance, maybe fifty feet away, he thought he saw something blue—a bruise on the endless sea of white. He headed that way, his feet crunching and sinking slightly in the cold stuff below him with every step. There was no wind, but the coldness of the air bit into his skin, as if someone had just flicked on his senses with a switch. He looked down at his clothes and saw them magically transform from what he'd been wearing by the fire back on the beach to a huge parka and heavy pants and boots. Gloves and a thick wool hat on his head completed the transformation. Much better.

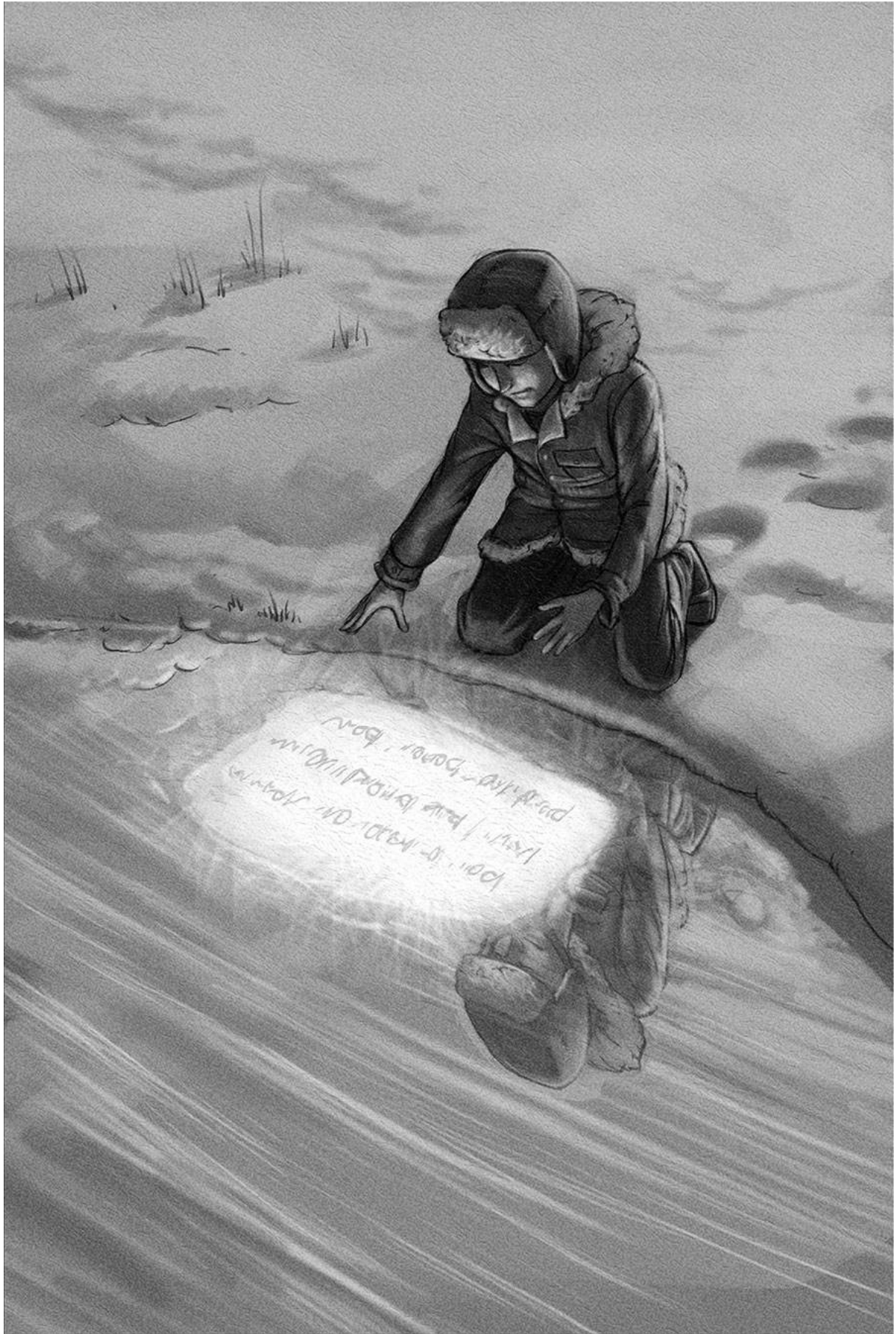
As he got closer to the spot of blue, it grew in size, but not just because he approached it. It literally *grew*, expanding outward like a drop of food coloring on a paper towel. Tick stopped and watched as its leading edge came toward him, then stopped at his feet. He could see that it was frozen water, but the icy lake seemed unnatural, as if it were made up of that nasty colored stuff used to create small ponds at the miniature golf place.

Tick dropped to his knees, knowing this was what he was supposed to do. Crystals of snow plumed out from behind him, dancing across the surface of the deep blue ice. Somehow they avoided a portion of the lake, forming a perfectly white rectangular frame. Tick knew what would happen before it did.

The rectangle flickered like a television coming to life, and then a moving image appeared on the ice, replacing the blue.

Tick leaned forward, placing his hands on the outer edge of the cold, frozen lake. What he saw stopped his heart for three full seconds. His mom and his sister, marching toward a huge wall of broken stone. They were led by two creatures that he'd run into before—long, gangly things that seemed to be made from coils of solid smoke.

Sleeks.





Creatures

Lisa had felt terror before. When she and Kayla had been taken to that strange house with those strange women and the earthquake had hit. The storm of lightning and thunder. That had been her first true taste of fear.

And now she was experiencing it again.

The creatures that had taken her and her mom were ruthless and brutal as they dragged the two of them down the slope and across the grass to the broken castle. Their grip was hard and their pace furious.

They walked along a stream, the rushing water sparkling and glinting in the sunlight, the sound not doing a thing to help soothe Lisa's nerves. She remembered Tick telling the story of his first visit to the Thirteenth Reality and the battle that had been fought here with the fangen. At the time, she could never have imagined that one day she'd be in the same place, in the same kind of trouble.

"What do you want with us?" Lisa's mom asked for the twentieth time. And for the twentieth time, the creatures said nothing.

Lisa looked at the Barrier Wand that was still in her mom's clutches, surprised that one of the monsters hadn't taken it from her. If she remembered Tick's tale completely, the castle of Mistress Jane was another hotspot for Chi'karda, so her mom would need only a free minute to switch the dials and instruments and wink them out of there. They just needed the right opportunity.

Finally, they approached the ruins of the once-grand structure, the stream disappearing under a stone wall. Now that they were closer, Lisa could finally get a good look at the different types of creatures that had been crawling all over the crumpled and half-standing walls of the castle. Some matched Tick's description of the nasty fangen: blackish skin, splotchy green hair, giant mouths full of spiked teeth, thin membranes of wings stretching out from their backs. There were others. More of the smoky-rope kind that had captured Lisa and her mom. Some that were small and hunched and charcoal gray, like grotesque statues come to life. Some that looked like a cross between an alligator and a bull, with massively strong arms. They all blended together

into one display of horror.

And their purpose was obvious. They were trying to rebuild the castle, stone by stone.

Their current captors stopped them by one of the more solid sections of the ruins, about thirty feet from where the stream slipped under the wall. A huge wooden door stood next to it—or what used to be a door. Now it was mostly shredded, chunks and splinters hanging off around the edges. Darkness lurked behind the opening.

The monstrous pair threw Lisa and her mom to the ground in front of the door. The two of them immediately crawled to each other and huddled together, the Barrier Wand snuggled between them, its surface hard and cold. Lisa's mom started slyly turning the dials and switches.

The creatures floated up into the air and flew over to the wall of the castle, their wispy figures like streams of smoke whipping through the wind. They landed on the hard stone and used their long arms and legs to crawl up its side, mixing in with the rest of the other dark and twisted creatures.

“Get us out of here,” Lisa whispered to her mom.

“I'm working on it.” Her hands slowly turned a dial until it clicked. “But I don't want them to notice. And I'm not even sure I want us to wink out of here just yet.”

“What? Why?”

Her mom looked disappointed. “After all we went through to get here in the first place? There has to be a reason that Chi'karda and Reality pulled us here when we tried to grab Atticus. Maybe we're on his trail or something. Or maybe we're being guided to his nanolocator, and this is a stop along the way.”

Lisa was a little ashamed for wanting to hightail it out of there, but being dead wouldn't help Tick much either. “Or maybe we're about to be eaten for dinner by all of these monsters.”

“Maybe. Don't worry your little heart, girl. I have the Wand all set, and if worse comes to worst, I'll click the button and wink us away. We can start all over again. From the beginning. Without any hope.”

Lisa groaned and rolled her eyes. “Okay, Mom. I got your point loud and clear.”

There was movement in the darkness behind the shattered door, and a figure appeared, like a shrouded ghost. Lisa wanted to get up and run, but she kept her eyes focused on the person who approached. As the figure came into the light, Lisa could see a robe made of a coarse, off-white material, its hood pulled up and over the face, hiding it. Two hands emerged from the arms of the robe, the fingers folded together in front. Lisa had expected the hands to

be gnarled and ancient, but the skin looked young and healthy.

A woman's hands.

The robed stranger walked to where Lisa and her mom sat. She was tall and thin, and the image of her hooded head gave her a commanding presence, like an ancient oracle or druid.

"You can wink away if you wish," the lady said, her voice a hollow ring. "But I ask only that you allow me to tell you one very important thing first."

"What is it?" Lisa's mom replied, cautious.

The woman reached up with those young hands of hers and pulled back the hood of her robe, revealing a homely, stoic face framed by short, black hair. She had a nose that pointed straight out like a carrot.

"We brought you here," she said, "because you're trying to find Atticus Higginbottom. And so are we."



Words on Ice

Tick's heart had dropped upon seeing his mom and sister captured by Sleeks, and he almost beat his fists on the ice where their images appeared, thinking he could break through, dive through, and save them somehow. He yelled to them as they were brought to the foot of Jane's now-broken castle and thrown to the ground, though he knew it was pointless. Full of desperation and rage, he could only sit there and shake. Helpless.

The screen—the rectangle of frozen pond—suddenly flickered, and the scene disappeared, replaced by a few lines of written words. Before he even read it, he knew it was some kind of riddle, and for some reason, it made him mad. He screamed and *did* hit the ice, cursing Reality for playing such ridiculous games with him. His family was in trouble, and here he was, forced to solve a silly puzzle again.

But on the other hand, he was good at it. The fabric of the universe understood his mind and was trying to help him. Was trying to form its complexities together and present to him a solution in a way he could best grasp it. Just like what had happened with the Haunce.

Tick gained control of his emotions and forced himself to read the words.

The smallest thing begins to grow
It needs no light, it needs no glow
This thing, it fears the weakest breath
And yet it cannot embrace death
The greatest man or bull or steed
Or queen or doe or stinging bee
Eats it, smells it, drinks it some
And one day it they will become

Tick sighed. He'd hoped the riddle would be easy, that the answer would jump out at him. But no. Of course not.

He started thinking.



“My name is Mordell,” the woman said to Lisa and her mom. She sat on the grass next to them, her legs folded beneath her flowing robe, her back straight, and her hands settled on her knees. “I am a Lady of Blood and Sorrow, a new order started by our master, Mistress Jane, to serve her in the quest to create a Utopia for mankind. To bring eternal happiness to humans once and for all. We bear our name of despair to teach the world that we will do anything, make any sacrifice, to bring this Utopia to pass. We are servants only.”

Lisa felt queasy as Mordell spoke. She seemed to have a blank stare as she recited her mantra, as if it had been beaten into her since she was a kid.

“Why are you looking for my son?” Lisa’s mom asked. She had the Barrier Wand gripped in one hand, the other hovering above the button on top. Lisa also had a hand on the device. They could wink away with one click.

“Because we know he is with our master,” Mordell replied. “We believe that they disrupted the fabric of Reality by using such astronomical levels of Chi’karda that they were ripped away into the Nonex.”

Mom gasped, and one of her hands flew up to her mouth.

“The Nonex?” Lisa repeated. That didn’t sound very good. “What’s that?”

Her mom looked over at her, her face somehow showing even more worry than it had before. “We don’t know much about it, but it’s a place that both exists and doesn’t exist, trapped somewhere between the dimensions of Reality. Sort of a no-man’s-land, where your mind is the only thing keeping you alive. They say it’s where you go if you ever meet one of your Alterants.”

Lisa had the thought that her mom was a true scientist, unable to stop herself from breaking it down to textbook explanations despite knowing her own son might be trapped there. But her eyes held deep love and concern still.

Mordell continued. “Mistress Jane has been training us to understand the ways of Chi’karda. It flows here in ways it does not in the other Realities. We’ve brought every one of our kind from the stations we’ve established throughout the Thirteen Realities. Even as we speak, they are gathering inside the Great Hall of the castle behind me, which by fate, survived the destruction.”

“What are they doing?” Lisa asked.

Mordell’s eyes focused on hers for the first time. “We are meditating, probing the universe, seeking any sign of Atticus or Mistress Jane. We must find their nanolocators or sense their presence. We have to be ready to snatch them if they appear, as *soon* as they appear. Right now, it’s as if they have been wiped from Reality.”

Lisa’s mom didn’t seem surprised, as if she’d given up doubting anything

anymore. “And how did you find us? Did you wink us here?”

“We have the data on your son’s nanolocator. In our probing, we saw you looking for him. And then you were captured by the Great Disturbance that has plagued the Realities ever since our master disappeared. We rescued you from it and brought you here so that you could help us. We’re no longer enemies; we have the same purpose.”

Lisa’s mind caught on those two words: *Great Disturbance*. The lady had said them as if they were the name of a place or a person. She asked what it meant.

Mordell looked into her eyes once again. “We call it the Void of Mist and Thunder, and if we don’t find a way to stop it, the lives of our master and your brother, and the quest to build Utopia, won’t matter. Because every last person in the Realities will be dead.”

Lisa and her mom looked at each other, dread hanging in the air like soaked curtains. How did you even follow up something like that with questions? There were too many to know where to start.

Mordell stood up in a move so graceful that Lisa didn’t even notice until the woman was on her feet.

“Come,” the Lady of Blood and Sorrow said. “There will be time for explanations later. Right now we need you to join us in our meditations and help us probe the universe until we find those we seek.” She turned and started walking toward the broken door of the broken castle.

Lisa knew there’d be no discussing this with her mom. They both got up and followed the strange woman into the darkness.



Watching TV

Mothball was thankful something had finally gone right in her life. Klint Tanner had given her a cup of hot tea as they sat down in his living room to talk about the world and its problems. The news was going to be rough and depressing, she knew it, but at least she had some tea to warm her bones and settle her nerves.

Sally had asked for chocolate milk, which embarrassed Mothball to no end. Especially when the buffoon asked if he could have a straw to “sip it up with.” Oh, she liked the man well enough, she supposed, but how he’d become a Realitant, she’d never know.

Tanner sat down in a chair opposite them, a remote in his hands. There was a huge television on the wall, bigger than any Mothball had ever seen in her life. Of course, they didn’t do a whole lot of that sort back in the Fifth Reality.

Tanner was a scrawny man with mussed-up hair and whiskers on his chin. But he had sharp eyes, and he took his job seriously.

“I’ve put together a hodgepodge of what’s been going on lately,” the man said after everyone was settled. He clicked the remote, and the television buzzed to life. “I’d say sit back and enjoy the show, but I don’t think you will very much. It’s not pretty.”

“Oh, doncha worry, son,” Sally said, his straw pinched between his fingers as he slurped his chocolate milk. He looked like an overgrown two-year-old kid in overalls. “Back where we work, we sho ’nough used to things that ain’t purty. Ain’t that right, Mothball?” He laughed, a booming sound that could only be described as a guffaw.

Mothball wanted to slug him; she knew very well he was talking about *her*. But then again, Sally wasn’t the handsomest cat in the litter, so maybe he was poking fun at himself as well. “Right as rain, you are,” she said. “But I’m sure you were a cute wee one when you were born and all. Been downhill ever since, it ’as.”

Sally laughed again.

“Shall we, um, get on with it?” Tanner asked.

“Yes, indeed,” Mothball replied. “So sorry for my partner, here. A bit cracked in the skull, he is.”

Tanner smiled, but it was a haunted one. “I’m afraid you’re both going to lose your appetite for laughing soon. The whole world is in one big heap of a mess. Fires, riots, rebellions, anarchy. Looting and murders. Like I said, it’s not pretty.” He pointed his remote at the television and clicked it again.

A horror show came to life on the big screen.



Paul had never understood why people liked to drink warm milk. He’d heard of it before, but it always sounded nasty to him. Warm *chocolate* milk, maybe. But take out that brown stuff and he wanted no part of it. Milk was meant to be ice-cold, especially when washing down some cookies.

At least those were yummy. Oatmeal and raisin.

Gretel was sitting in her chair, eating and sipping along with Paul and Sofia, but she’d yet to say anything about . . . well, anything. Paul still had no idea why they were there, which was why all he could think about was how much he didn’t like warm milk.

Sofia cleared her throat. “We really appreciate you letting us in, but I don’t think we have a lot of spare time on our hands. I’m sure Master George wants us to learn what it is you have to tell us, and then get back to him.”

Paul felt like he needed to add something. “Yeah, let’s get on with it.” He winced on the inside. That had come out a little harsher than he’d meant it. “I’m dying of curiosity here. Ma’am.” He threw that in there to sound polite.

Gretel took the last bite of her cookie then drained her cup of milk. She placed her dishes on a small table beside her. “I understand your impatience, but you’re going to have to bear with me a few moments longer before we get to *my* part of this story. First, I need to hear yours.”

Paul wanted to groan and kick something, but he kept himself still and quiet.

“What do you mean?” Sofia asked.

Gretel shrugged as if it were obvious. “I haven’t had one squirt of communication with the Realitants—or civilization at all, for that matter—in more than a year. I’m no longer what you’d consider ‘active,’ and informing me of the latest has to be on the bottom of George’s to-do list. So I need to get caught up on everything that’s been going on.”

“Everything that’s been going on?” Paul repeated. “That’s like asking us to give you a quick wrap-up of the Civil War. You have any idea how much has happened in the last *year*?”

“Well, actually, no, I don’t. Which is why I need you to tell me about it.”

She folded her hands in her lap and raised her eyebrows.

Paul looked over at Sofia. “You tell her.”

Sofia had impatience stamped all over her face, and she started speaking immediately, as if she didn’t want to waste one more second. She began in the only place that made sense—how she, Paul, Tick, and Sato got recruited by the Realitants—and then she flowed into the problems they’d had with Reginald Chu and Mistress Jane. On and on and on she went, speaking so fast it gave Paul a headache trying to keep up, but eventually she got to the part about Jane trying to sever the Fifth Reality from existence and almost destroying the entire universe instead. She sounded like she was telling someone how to make breakfast.

Finally, she finished.

Gretel didn’t say anything at first; she just kept looking at Sofia as if she needed some time to absorb all the things she’d been told.

“Well?” Paul asked to break the awkward silence. “What do you think? Things as rosy as you pictured, living out here in your swamp palace?”

The old woman looked sharply at him, her expression turning grave. “Son, what you’ve just described to me is far, far worse than I imagined, even in my worst nightmares after the earthquake that hit this place. I think I finally understand why George sent you to me. Come, we need to enter my safe haven.”

She stood up, her eyes distant, and gestured for the young Realitants to follow. Paul and Sofia exchanged uneasy glances then joined Gretel, leaving the comfy living room with the warm fire and entering a cold, uninviting room with shiny steel walls. There was a bare light in the ceiling that flickered and a large safe in one corner of the room. Gretel shut the door behind them with a heavy, ringing thud; Paul spun around to see that it was also made of steel like the inside of a bank vault.

Gretel spun a wheel-handle and clicked a big lock. Then she walked over to the safe in the corner—a big, black square—and started turning the large combination dial. Paul stared, wondering what in the world they were about to see.

As Gretel continued to work at the safe’s mechanism, she spoke over her shoulder. “I don’t call it the *safe haven* for nothing. It’s a haven for my safes. A safe within a safe. What I’m protecting here is very important.”

Paul asked the obvious question. “What is it?”

There was a loud click, and then the door of the safe swung open. Paul and Sofia stepped forward to see what was inside. It was an old, tattered, dusty shoebox. Gretel pulled it out and set it on the floor. Carefully. Then she sat right beside it, folding her legs underneath her like a teenager. Paul and

Sofia sat next to her on the ground. Paul's eyes stayed glued to the box. He was so curious he almost reached out and opened the lid himself.

Gretel flicked both of them a knowing look. Then she lifted the warped lid and flipped it over. Inside the box lay a small cube of gray metal with a green button on top. The old woman lifted up the cube and held it out for everyone to see.

“Push this button,” she said in a mesmerized voice, almost like a chant, “and the Realities will change forever. For good. Or for evil.”



The Ladies of Blood and Sorrow

Tick sat in the snow in the meditative pose of a Buddhist he'd seen once on TV—his legs crossed under him, his arms resting on top of them with his fingers pushed together and pointing upward, and his eyes closed. Couldn't hurt, he'd thought.

He'd been trying for at least a half hour to push all other thoughts from his mind and focus on the riddle he'd seen written on the ice. But he was having a hard time concentrating. The words floated in the darkness of his thoughts, visible in his mind's eye as white letters on a black background. He ran through the lines, letting the skills he'd developed for this sort of thing take their natural course as his brain digested and regurgitated the riddle again and again:

The smallest thing begins to grow

It needs no light, it needs no glow

This thing, it fears the weakest breath

And yet it cannot embrace death

The greatest man or bull or steed

Or queen or doe or stinging bee

Eats it, smells it, drinks it some

And one day it they will become

Tick sat in the wind and the cold and relaxed, doing what he did best. Thinking.



Lisa and her mom followed Mordell down a long, cold passage under the hard stone of the castle, walking along the dark waters of the stream that rushed by. Lisa knew this was the place Tick and his Realitant friends had barely escaped from during their first harrowing trip to the Thirteenth Reality. Imagining them at that time—Tick and the others desperately waiting for the Barrier Wand to kick in and wink them out, while hordes of bloodthirsty fangen beat down the walls and came after them—sent chills across her skin. It made her feel incredibly sorry for her lost brother, and made her love him more than ever before. Tears welled up in her eyes.

She knew what had happened next. The Barrier Wand didn't even have a Chi'karda Drive inside its golden case at the time—Mistress Jane had secretly removed it—but Tick had displayed his unbelievable power over Chi'karda, using his powers to wink everyone to safety on his own. There had been signs and hints his whole life that there was something special about him, but after that day, the Realitants knew it for sure.

Tick was a wizard. A silly word, but that's how Lisa saw him. Sure, Master George claimed Tick's power could be scientifically explained—or someday would be—but Lisa didn't care about the specifics, the nitty-gritty details. Her brother was magic, he was special, and they needed to find him so he could do great things for the world. For *all* the worlds.

The passageway led through an arch to the right and into a small chamber carved out of black rock. Mordell silently led them through the opening and into the room that had absolutely no decoration or furniture of any kind. The only light came from a single torch that burned and hissed in a sconce on the wall. About twenty other women sat upon the hard ground in a circle. One break in the ring was vacant, and it was just big enough for the three newcomers to sit down.

“Even though its size is humble,” Mordell said in a solemn voice, “we call this the Great Hall because its purpose is grand. This hallowed place is where the Ladies of Blood and Sorrow come to show our respect and devotion to Chi'karda and to renew our commitment to seek a Utopia for all mankind.” She looked at Lisa and her mom. “Your presence here is allowed by my invitation only. Please, sit.”

She motioned toward the empty spot in the circle. Lisa and her mom, holding hands, went over and sat down on the smooth surface of the black rock floor. Her mom cradled the Barrier Wand in her lap, and Lisa noticed that her finger hovered over the trigger button at the top.

Lisa took a moment to study the circle of women, all of whom were dressed in the same off-white, coarse robes that Mordell wore. The Ladies

each had a meditative, almost blank look on their hooded faces. It was creepy in the scant light.

Mordell sat down next to Lisa. “We all know of the nature of this room in which we have gathered,” she began. “The Great Hall, birthed by the will of our master, Mistress Jane herself. For reasons we may never learn, the Thirteenth Reality is more focused with Chi’karda’s might, more concentrated, more plentiful in its power than any other world. And this hallowed place is the heart of that power, which is why our master built her castle on this land and carved the Great Hall in this rock. Using the methods taught to us by She Who Tamed the Fire, we will now join hands and probe the universe together. And when we find our master—and her companions, if possible—we must unite to bring them back here.”

“ ‘If possible?’ ” Lisa asked, not liking the sound of that one bit. Maybe they were using Tick as a means to an end and were planning to dump him as soon as they found Jane. And what was with all the fancy mumbo-jumbo talk?

Mordell turned to her, not looking pleased by the interruption. “You’ve spoken out of turn, girl. This is not allowed in the Great Hall.”

Lisa refused to be intimidated by this servant of the woman who’d tried to kill Tick. “I just want my brother to come back safely too. Make sure he does.”

Mordell considered her for a moment then finally nodded. “I give you my word that if it’s possible in any way to do so, we will. But understand that our master is our first priority, for the sake of you, and your children, and your children’s children.”

Lisa thought of a million nasty things that she wanted to say, but she kept her mouth shut. She could only hope now. She squeezed her mom’s arm, who gave her a nod and a look as if to say, *Don’t worry. Tick can fend for himself.*

Mordell returned her attention to her counterparts sitting in the circle. “We have with us today the mother of Atticus Higginbottom—yes, we know who you are—with a Barrier Wand constructed by her own hand. She has locked onto the nanolocator of her son, which will serve to benefit us in our search. The Wand’s presence alone will aid us. Now, we must all take hands, including our visitors’.”

Lisa had no problem grabbing her mom’s hand, but she was a little wary of taking one of Mordell’s. She clasped her fingers around those of the woman, which were icy cold and felt brittle, as if they’d collapse into a heap of powder if Lisa squeezed. So she didn’t.

“Let us begin,” Mordell announced. “Close your eyes. Grasp the Chi’karda that flows within this room. Reach into the Realities—reach into the universe.”

The Ladies of Blood and Sorrow began to hum. Lisa was the last to close her eyes, but before she did, a spray of orange light started to glow within the center of their circle.



Tick didn't know how long he'd been sitting in the icy snow, next to the icy pond, feeling the icy wind. But he felt it all the way to the core of his bones, and *icy* was the only word to describe it.

He didn't let it faze him. He thought, concentrated, and focused on the riddle. He knew the fabric of Reality was at his fingertips, waiting for his mind to organize a solution in the way he best understood. The complexities of the universe had been laid at his feet in the form of a riddle.

When the pieces of the puzzle finally clicked into place, the answer hovered within his thoughts, a word as clear as if it were written on a sign hung in front of his face.

Dust.

He opened his eyes and whispered the word to the biting wind, which whisked it away and carried it to whatever ears needed to hear it.

A few seconds later, the world around him was ripped apart, exploding into a horrifying display of noise and light. Tick screamed, but no one heard the sound. Not even him.



A Rush of Violence

Lisa was beginning to feel uncomfortable.

The rattling buzz in the room had grown to an unbearable pitch, vibrating her skull and shaking the walls and floor of the Great Hall. The rock creaked and groaned, as if the walls might burst apart and spray them with tiny fragments. It took all of Lisa's willpower not to open her eyes or scream or run away. Even through her closed eyelids, she could sense the bright orangeness of what she knew was the power of Chi'karda.

The Ladies of Blood and Sorrow continued to hum, and Lisa heard a slight rustling, as if the women were swaying back and forth in their trancelike state. What they were doing, she had no idea, and she certainly didn't know what she could do to help. But she felt the vibration of power inside her body, and there was definitely something big happening.

She squeezed her mom's hand, and her mom squeezed back. Something hard and warm—almost hot—touched Lisa's forearm. She opened her eyelids to the slightest, smallest crack to see what it was. Her mom had moved the Barrier Wand closer, wanting to show her that it was heating up for some reason.

Yes, something big was definitely going on.



Tick's body was flying through a fog.

Lightning and thunder flashed and boomed all around him, streaks of white fire crossing the gray, misty air, barely missing his body. The horrible sounds rattled his head, pierced his ears painfully. He felt the sense of flying in his stomach and head, but there wasn't a great rushing of wind blowing at him. His skin was cold one second and hot the next. Even his vision would go haywire—everything turning into a grayish blur then coming into focus again, the edges of the lightning bolts sharp and clear and brilliant. It was as if his senses had a loose connection to his brain.

He tried to quell the rising fear and panic that threatened to consume him. He had no idea what was happening or where he was, much less how he could

use his newfound powers to help the situation. He was hurtling through a void of nothing, surrounded by an angry, powerful storm of energy.

He twisted his head left and right, trying to see any sign of Chu or Mistress Jane. They were nowhere near him, according to what his eyes told his brain, but on some deep, deep level, he felt as though he were still holding their hands. That maybe the storm was simply an illusion and nothing more.

He continued his flight. Nausea filled his belly. He tried to speak, but his voice was lost in the noise of the chaos around him. He had the horrible thought that maybe this was how he'd spend the rest of eternity—that maybe the Nonex, in the end, was nothing more than this.

Tick flew through a void of mist and thunder.



Mistress Jane didn't understand what was going on, and nothing on earth caused her more distress than *uncertainty*. She was a scientist, blood and bone, to the very core of her soul and mind. A scientist. And being here, surrounded by a world of mist and lightning and sound, she didn't have the slightest guess of what was going on. It made no logical sense. And that made her angry.

She looked to her left, though all movement was strange in this inexplicable void. Her senses told her she was moving at great speed, yet she felt no rush of wind. And her surroundings didn't seem to shift at a pace that made sense with the movement of her head.

Reginald Chu was a few feet away from her, keeping an even pace. His eyes were still closed, and he held his hands out before him like Superman. But he didn't look peaceful or asleep. His face was pinched, like someone waiting to jump off a bridge with a bungee cord. Sweat trickled down his brow, giving Jane even more evidence that their motion through this fog didn't match the physical effects on their body.

Jane knew Tick had done this somehow. He had vaulted them from the Nonex and thrown them into a place that was obviously even worse. Maybe she'd made a huge mistake trusting him to help her.

She closed her eyes and reached into the void with her senses, reaching to take back her Chi'karda from Tick's control. Surprisingly, it was there, waiting. She filled her body with the power, sucking it in, keeping it at bay until she needed it. Kept it there like a bomb waiting for a lit fuse.



The Great Hall had continued to buzz and vibrate, the Ladies humming, the orange power of Chi'karda burning the air with energy. Lisa could only sit and wait, though it was agonizing.

Mordell suddenly spoke up beside her with a voice that easily cut through the other noise in the room.

“We’ve found her! We’ve reconnected with her nanolocator! Reginald Chu is there as well. We need everyone to focus. Begin to pull them back.”

The woman paused, and Lisa didn’t dare ask the obvious question. Not because it had been forbidden, but because she was terrified of the answer. Mordell answered her anyway.

“There is, unfortunately, no sign of the boy, Atticus Higginbottom.”



Finding Tick

Lorena knew something was happening with her Barrier Wand, and it wasn't just that the Drive within it was helping pool the power of Chi'karda for the Ladies of Blood and Sorrow. Something else was at play. The metal surface was hot, almost too much to touch now, and the Wand had a hum of its own.

Mordell's words had been like a death sentence. Lorena had suspected the truth from the start, and the people here obviously had different priorities than she did. They wanted Jane back, at any cost. Even if the cost was the life of Lorena's son. And she didn't plan to let that happen.

Breaking her handhold with both Lisa and the stranger to her left, Lorena opened her eyes and straightened the Barrier Wand in her lap. She quickly ran through the dials and switches, adjusting and evaluating, making educated guesses since she was in such an unprecedented situation. Sweat poured down her face.

"What are you doing?" Mordell shouted, the echo ringing along the walls and ceiling of the black, rocky room. "Rejoin hands this instant!"

Lorena gave the woman a nasty glare. "Back off, lady, or you'll be seeing and feeling a lot of blood and sorrow today."

A quick glance at Lisa showed that her daughter was smiling.



Tick felt something tugging on his heart.

Not like despair, or love, or missing someone. It was a literal tug, as if someone had sunk a hook into his heart and cinched it tight with a strong rope. And then the rope started pulling.

He cried out, feeling a fire ignite within him that scorched his insides with pain. He clutched his chest with both hands, gripping his shirt and pulling his fingers into tight fists, pressing on his sternum. It did no good. The pull on the rope was getting stronger.

It hurt so bad. The gray mist swirled around him; lightning bolts exploded through the air as the thunder thumped and boomed. His body

continued to fly through it all.

And his insides screamed with pain.



Mistress Jane knew something had changed. She felt a presence within her, as if some other soul had joined with hers, trying to fight her for occupancy. She looked at Chu, who was still close to her, just as his eyes opened. He'd felt it, too.

He yelled something at her. His words were utterly lost in the deafening noise of the storm around them, but she could read his lips: *Save me*.

Jane thought of the Ladies of Blood and Sorrow and the things she'd trained them for. The endless possibilities they could accomplish within the Great Hall of her castle, where Chi'karda gathered so powerfully. And finally, something logical clicked into place for her. The Ladies had combined their efforts, pooled all their power, and had reached out for her nanolocator. Tick had pulled them out of the Nonex into some no-man's-land barrier between it and the rest of Reality. Just close enough to reestablish contact.

Jane smiled, knowing exactly what expression was on her red mask: joy.

Chu reached out a hand to her, his mouth still moving with unheard words. Fear enveloped him, and sweat covered his face even more than before.

Jane felt ashamed for him. Embarrassed by his weakness. But she knew what the man was capable of. And they'd come so close to partnering before. So close. Until the boy Tick ruined everything, including Jane's body.

Chu—her partner. Utopia—her mission. She twisted her body, straining to reach out with her arm.

Mistress Jane took Reginald Chu's hand.



Lisa watched as her mom worked furiously over the Barrier Wand, adjusting the instruments, fine-tuning them with the slightest of movements. The Ladies around the circle had continued their efforts, ignoring the mutiny of Lisa and her mom. Mordell and the woman who'd been sitting next to Lisa's mom had simply moved closer until they could reseal the ring of held hands in their magic circle. Maybe they figured they could deal with the turncoats later.

"Mom, what are you doing?" Lisa asked. She'd been scared to interrupt her mom's concentration, but she couldn't wait one more second.

"I've almost got it." She had her tongue pinched between her lips, and sweat trickled down both sides of her face. "I can't believe it, but his signal is there. Before it wasn't *missing* so much as showing that he didn't exist

anymore. But he's there, no doubt about it."

"Really?" Lisa tried not to let her hopes leap to the sky.

"But it's so weak. So weak. I'm trying to latch on, trying to pull him closer. But I don't dare try to fully wink him in yet. His body could literally tear apart and turn into an atom soup."

Lisa's heart dropped. "Mom, please get him. Mom, please." She'd never realized until that moment how much she loved that stupid brother of hers.

"We will, baby," her mom said. "I swear it."

The buzz and hum and orange light of Chi'karda filled the room like a nebula.



Things started to change around Tick, even as the pain inside his chest grew worse, like needles piercing his heart. His shoulders shook from the ache of trying to muffle the sobs that wanted to escape him, but he tried to push aside all the pain and focus on his surroundings.

The gray mist had thinned out, allowing his vision to reach much farther away. The bolts of white fire shooting through the air had not ceased at all, and he saw more of them than ever—a rain of lightning that continued for miles and miles. Violent sounds shook the gaseous world and continued to hurt his ears and splinter his brain with the worst headache he'd ever experienced.

And in the distance, coming straight toward him, were . . . *things*.

Dark objects. Huge objects. They looked like bulky chunks of broken spaceships, destroyed and shredded, hurling through empty space. There were dozens of them, flying through the gray air, rushing in. As they got closer, Tick could no longer tell if that was true or if he was actually hurtling toward *them*. But then he saw that they were less like spaceships, and more like floating mountains torn from their foundations—the edges rocky and broken, the centers filled with vegetation and trees.

He didn't understand why, but he felt a weighty sense of dread, and not just from the prospect of smashing into the stony chunks of land. There was something ominous about those massive rocks, like they were alive and wanted him dead.

The nearest one was only a few hundred feet away when hundreds of vines shot out from the nooks and crannies of the rock's craggy surface, like an army of snakes striking out at a predator. Their tips tapered to a point. The vines coiled in the air then came for Tick.



Lisa jumped when her mom suddenly cried out, a sound that was

impossible to tell whether it was good or bad. She was tight-faced and sweating as she ran her hands up and down the Barrier Wand like it was some kind of musical instrument.

“What’s going on?” Lisa asked.

“I’m latched to him,” her mom responded. “I just can’t seem to wink the boy in.”



Cords of Light

The vines flew through the air, coming at Tick as if they were magnetized ropes and he was a big piece of metal. He'd been sort of complacent since being pulled into the massive gray void, watching and observing, wondering what Reality was going to do to him now that he'd solved the riddle his consciousness had presented in his mind.

But the vines looked deadly, the massive structures of rock and vegetation were hurtling toward his body, and he had no more time to sit back. He'd mastered his control over Chi'karda. It was time to use it.

The ends of the first vines reached him and quickly coiled around his arms and legs. They cinched tight and jerked him forward even faster, throwing his body at the rock from which they'd emerged.

Tick struggled against the strength of the ropy chains, looked at the jagged granite chunk rushing up at him, and tried not to panic. He relaxed his arms and legs, letting his body go limp. Reaching down, deep inside his heart, he found the spark that had become so familiar to him, that burning flicker of flame that he knew he could ignite into an inferno.

Pure power exploded away from him, streaks of orange light and fire. The surge of Chi'karda slammed into the massive rock, detonating it into a million splinters of stone, which Tick whisked away with a single thought. Like a flinty cloud of smoke caught in a gust of wind, it flew to the right, gone from his vision. The vines that had imprisoned him were incinerated; not a single trace was left.

But there were dozens more of the floating mountains, and each one had more of the vines popping out of their surfaces, pointy ends focused on Tick. He took hold of his power, pulled it all back within his chest, sucking it in like a great vacuum. Then he used his eyes and mind to start destroying.

Looking this way and that, he hurled streaks of Chi'karda outward with each glance. They shot forward like streams of fire, arrows of might, smashing into each of the massive hunks of stone, dirt, and vegetation. The flying structures exploded, obliterated into dusty clouds that whipped away like the first one had. Tick barely had time to make sure he'd succeeded in

destroying one before he had to look at the next threat.

Explosion after explosion, he destroyed them. Reaching with all his strength, he was able to send the Chi'karda beams farther and farther out, killing the vines as soon as they came into view.

Without warning, and just as he began to feel like he might get out of the mess, everything changed as quickly as one wink of his eye.

The endless gray sky disappeared, along with the fog of debris from the countless erupted balls of rock. Blackness replaced it, a sea of stars in the background, as if he floated in the deepest realm of outer space. His sense of movement also stopped, jarring him at first. Pulling in a deep breath, he heard the sound of his own gasp and felt his insides twist until he regained his equilibrium. All was silent as he hung there in the empty void.

Several seconds passed. Then each one of those pinpoints of light around him stretched out into a long beam of brightness, all of them pointed at Tick and moving at a blistering speed.



Lorena stood up, her mind so focused on the Barrier Wand that it felt as though she'd become one with it. The orange light of Chi'karda filled the room, blinding her vision. She couldn't separate what the Ladies of Blood and Sorrow were doing from the power generated by her own efforts with the Wand. She'd never experienced anything like it. She wondered if this was how Tick felt when he was controlling the Chi'karda directly. She'd quit adjusting the dials and switches without even realizing it.

And then she remembered. She was in the Thirteenth Reality. Things were different here.

Lisa was at her side, keeping quiet—bless her heart—but a quick glance showed that the poor girl desperately wanted to know what was going on. Lorena went back to the business at hand, knowing she couldn't risk breaking her concentration. She couldn't put it into words or offer up a scientific explanation, but she had control over Chi'karda like never before, a link to Tick that she wasn't going to let go of. She was going to bring him home.

Even if she had to die doing it.



At first the arrows of light made Tick feel as if he were in a spaceship that had shifted into warp speed, about to blast to another part of the galaxy. But he felt no sense of motion, and the angles were wrong. As he twisted and turned in the void, he saw long lines of pure whiteness stretching toward him from every direction, like strings of perfectly straight lightning. And he didn't need a manual to know that their purpose was not to brighten his world so he

could read a book.

The beams kept coming.

He could easily shift his body, even move away if he wanted to, but there was no point. The things were heading for him no matter where he looked. Unless he winked to another place, those long strings of white were going to reach him. Besides, where would he wink? *Could* he even wink out of the void? He felt surprisingly calm, confident he could deal with the problem.

The first needles of light reached his body.

Just like the vines, they wrapped around his arms and legs; some slipped across his chest, others slithered along his ribs and side and along his back. He fought at them by flailing and kicking out, but it did no good. The Chi'karda he'd gathered before still swelled inside of him. He lashed out with the power, but *that* did no good either. It was as if the ropes of light were without substance until they needed it to serve their purpose, gripping tightly to his body.

There were dozens of the ropes, then hundreds, thousands. They bled together into a brilliant display of pure white light, covering every inch of his body. Only his head remained free, and he twisted his neck to see what was happening, trying to squirm out of it.

The bindings tightened, squeezing the air out of his lungs, but curiously, Tick felt no panic. His breathing remained even. The white ropes kept coming, flying in like eels until they hit his body and wrapped around the other coils of light. He'd become nothing but a head, sticking out of a blinding ball of brilliance with tendrils of light leading away from him in every direction.

Tick knew he couldn't let it keep going. He closed his eyes, pulled in more and more Chi'karda, filling his body and soul. He felt as if his insides were on fire. Still he kept at it, the power rushing into him like a falling deluge of scorching lava. He found himself liking it, loving the burn and surge of adrenaline, the power that filled him. He let it build, knowing he needed to unleash it but not wanting to. The earlier sensation of being tugged by a strong cable was still there, but it didn't hurt anymore.

The beams of light quit coming, but it didn't matter. He was wrapped neck to toe, unable to move a single muscle. The trailing ends of the ropes stretched out from his body in every direction, as if he were stuck in the middle of a giant spider web. All was silent and still, the light blinding.

The cords around him suddenly grew taut, then began to pull at his limbs and torso. Trying to rip his body into pieces.



Fighting the Void

At first Tick didn't feel the pain.

The power of Chi'karda within him burned so hot, so fierce, that he was unaware of all else except for a distant tugging sensation. Like he'd been thrown into a crowd and they were using his arms and legs as a wishbone. But the pain intensified, began to hurt. Bad. The pulling on his heart came back, too, as if two separate forces wanted to completely obliterate his body.

He screamed and released the power that had been building within, unleashing the Chi'karda with a mental burst of a detonation.

The bright whiteness of the ropes that had captured him was dimmed by the brilliance of orange light as Chi'karda erupted out of him. Streams of it shot from his body in arrows, and a cloud swelled from his skin, bulging underneath the cords like a burrowing animal.

The ropes held, pulling at him and continuing to jerk at his limbs and squeeze his middle. Pain stabbed at his joints and muscles. The pleasurable burn of power had been replaced by a different kind of fire, an agony that hurt worse than anything he'd ever experienced.

He screamed again and sent waves of Chi'karda crashing out of him, focusing on the strings of frozen lightning as if the whole thing were a video game, his mind the joystick. Orange flames struck at them, disintegrating half of them in one swoop of power. Tick's body snapped to the left, flying through the air as the severed ropes found life again, coming back at him and trying to reattach their ends to his arms and legs. He held his breath and continued the onslaught of Chi'karda, firing away at everything in sight.

Sprays of pure whiteness erupted in tiny explosions like bursts of electricity out of a live wire as his power severed more of the cords. More and more and more of them. His mind worked relentlessly as he tried to destroy the things attached to him while at the same time keeping the others at bay. He floated in that strange outer space, throwing flares of energy at anything that moved. The mix of white and orange was brilliant and blinding, almost making him lose his focus.

His body ripped free from the bindings.

Tick quit aiming then and simply threw all his power out in wave after wave, destroying whatever dared come at him. Explosions of light and sound. The black air trembled; his skull rattled; his skin seemed to vibrate on his bones like they might slip free of his body. He was completely blind; the whole world had gone white and hot. There was wind and thunder and the smell of ozone and burning charcoal. It all added together into a chaotic jumble of anarchy, driving Tick insane as he continued to thrust outward with the power of Chi'karda as fast as he could gather it. He didn't know what else to do, and he was scared to stop.

Something tugged at his heart again. He felt it despite the madness all around him—that sensation of strings being pulled, of being yanked from the inside.

His body suddenly jerked away from the explosions of energy and flying white cords of lightning. He flew through the blackness of that place that had seemed like outer space, the raging battle he'd been fighting gone in a flash. Things changed around him. Instead of darkness, there was a blue haze, splotches of green and brown and red flying past him. Chunks of gray rock appeared, coming at him like a rain of meteors.

Tick used his mind to control his flight, dodging and flipping and accelerating to avoid the rocks. As he approached the biggest one, a jagged stone the size of a bus, he had to slam on his mental brakes, coming to a stop right before he smashed into the thing. This caused the tugging inside him to intensify, sending shocks of pain throughout his nerves.

He reached out and felt the hard surface of the rock. He crawled along it to the other side, then jumped off it by pushing with his legs. His body once again catapulted through the strange-colored air, and the hurtful tug on his heart lessened enough that he could bear it.

Things changed once again.

He dove into a thick liquid, almost like a gel. Cold wetness soaked his hair and clothes and skin as his perception changed. He could sense up and down, everything shifting around him until it felt as if he were near the bottom of a deep ocean, swimming upward even though his arms and legs did nothing to make it so. He tore through the dark waters.

There was just enough light raining down in wavering rays that he could see creatures coming toward him. Long, powerful leviathans that swam with their back fins beating against the current like the tail of a dolphin. But these monsters had arms and burning red eyes, and Tick knew they wanted to grab him and stop him from reaching whatever was tugging him forward.

The monsters reached out, swimming in all at once. Clawed hands reached viciously for his body, snatching and scratching as their fingers tried to gain purchase. Tick lashed at them, swinging sluggishly through the thick

liquid as he continued his ascent. The creatures kept pace with him, trying their best to grab hold of his limbs or clothes. Kicking and squirming, he spun his body to make it harder to catch, and when one of the creatures latched on, he fought it off. He couldn't see much of their faces—they were all shadows and angles—but their red eyes burned like rocks of lava.

Two of them grabbed his legs, wrapping their arms tightly around one each. They squeezed, and their claws dug into his skin. The unseen forces still pulled him toward some unknown destination through a place he didn't even understand.

He burst through the surface, the two creatures still holding onto his legs as he rocketed toward a bright blue sky. The jellied water cascaded off them in blubbery droplets, and Tick looked down to see the faces of the monsters clearly for the first time. They weren't human at all: their bodies looked like sharks with arms, and their heads were smooth and glistening. Their eyes seemed to glow even brighter.

They flew toward the sapphire sky far above, but the weight of the two creatures and the pain of their claws and desperate clutches were making the journey unbearable. Tick punched down, smashing his fists into those odd faces. There was a piercing, awful screaming sound, but they held on. Tick punched again and again, those horrific cries ripping through the air, louder each time. He slammed down his fists once more, and they finally let go, dropping to the swiftly receding waters below them. He watched as they fell, listening as their screams slowly faded.

Tick continued launching toward the sky.

He looked up, a prickling sensation covering every inch of his body now, not just his insides. Forces pulled at him, like a magnet pulling a chunk of metal or Earth's gravity pulling a skydiver. Except he was flying up, heading toward a dome of brilliant, blinding blue.

Tick hurt. He'd been hurting for what seemed like days. But the closer he got to the blue wall of the sky, the more pain ripped through his body. He screamed like he'd never screamed before, the wind ripping at his face.

And then he hit the sea of blue, and it all went away.

Part 2



The Void



Hugs and Kisses

Tick's eyes were closed.

He opened them up and blinked a few times. He lay on a hard surface, and above him he could see the grooves and lines of a ceiling carved from black rock. Faces peered down at him, women in robes with the hoods pulled up over their heads. The women were old, and several of them made a circle around his spot as they looked at him with both wonder and fear.

"Hey," Tick said. His body ached from what he'd just been through—the flying and Chi'karda-laced battles, the plunge through liquid, the sharklike creatures, the lightning ropes, all of it—but not nearly as bad as it *should* have hurt. He felt almost at peace, though more confused than he'd been in a long time.

And then there were the sounds of commotion, people being pushed out of the way, calls of his name from two female voices that he recognized. *More* than recognized. Voices he knew as well as the sound of his own.

Lisa's face appeared above him first, then his mom's. Tears streamed down their faces as they came at him, pulling his body into hugs. Stunned, he hugged back, both of them in his arms, *their* arms wrapped around his shoulders and neck, his mom kissing him over and over on both cheeks. Somehow he managed to sit up, and they huddled for a long, long moment before anybody even spoke. Tick was overwhelmed, a part of him thinking it was all an illusion, terrified it might be and that he'd wake up any second. But sobs shook him as he fiercely hugged his mom and sister, a reunion that he'd begun to think might never happen.

Finally, his mom pulled back, as did Lisa. They both wiped tears from their eyes and cheeks.

"What . . ." Tick began, but his words were choked up in more sobs. Embarrassed, he wiped his own tears from his face.

"Happened?" his mom finished for him. "You're wondering what happened?"

"Uh, yeah," Lisa replied. "I think we'd all kinda like to know that."

Tick had begun to compose himself, and he suddenly felt like he needed to stand, get some fresh air, breathe. He got to his feet and looked around. The old women in their robes and hoods had backed away, gathering into groups of two or three and staring at him with questioning faces. They all stood in a small chamber carved from black rock, a place Tick had never seen before. He noticed a Barrier Wand lying on the floor by one of the slightly curved walls.

Looking at his mom, he said, "I think I could write down a million guesses of how I got here and be wrong every time. Where *are* we?"

She smiled in response. "There's a lot to tell. But that's an easy question to answer. We're in the Thirteenth Reality, in Mistress Jane's castle, in a room she calls the Great Hall."

Tick almost fell down. "The Thirteenth? Mistress Jane's castle?"

"Or what's left of it," Lisa said.

One of the strangers walked over to stand next to Tick and his little group. She had a long face and seemed to have an air of authority about her. "I'm happy to see that you've been pulled back from the Nonex, Atticus Higginbottom. I assure you that we tried as hard as we could to do so ourselves. You have my apologies. I'm sure our master will want to meet with you as soon as she's recovered."

Tick listened to the words coming out of the woman's mouth, getting more confused with each one. Finally, he just said, "Huh?"

She eyed Tick's mom, an eyebrow raised. "We will take our leave. You can do all the explaining you'd like to the young man. I haven't the time. But I'm sorry to say we'll be taking your Barrier Wand until further notice. Mistress Jane would not be happy if we allowed you to leave before she's spoken with you."

"Now just wait one minute, Mordell," Tick's mom replied. He was still wondering what the lady had meant by "your Barrier Wand." And why they were in Jane's castle. And how he'd gotten there. And lots of other stuff. "You have no right to do that after we helped you!"

Two of the other women grabbed the Wand that had been lying on the ground. It was slipped under a robe and gone from sight just like that.

"Hey!" Lisa shouted. "Give that back!"

Mordell spoke in a calm voice. "You're no longer considered enemies of our master. That's your reward for helping us. But we have plenty of creatures outside these doors that will ensure you do as we ask. Please don't push our hospitality. Wait here, and we'll return for you shortly. We'll also have food and drink brought to you."

Tick didn't feel like he knew enough about the situation to argue or help,

but his mom was fuming, and Lisa had her arms folded and a red face.

“Mom,” Tick said, “I’m not sure what’s going on, but if we really are in Jane’s castle, we better do what they say until we figure things out. Plus, I’m dying to hear how we all got here. Just let them go for now.”

His mom visibly relaxed, as if she was relieved to have the burden of the decision taken from her shoulders. “Okay.” She turned to Mordell. “Leave us alone and let us talk. And bring us that food.” The hint of command in her voice made Tick want to hoot and holler like he was at a football game. This was his *mom*.

A smile crept up Mordell’s face. “I’ve already said we would do the two things you ask. All things are done under the will and might of our master. Your food will be here within the half hour.”

After a slight bow of her head, she and the other women shuffled out of the room.



They sat in a small circle as they spoke, sharing each other’s tales. When they were finished, Tick knew *what* had happened, but not how or why. It was all crazy.

“So that bunch of old ladies winked in Jane and Chu, but were going to let me die out there?” he asked. “I can’t believe I actually helped us get close enough to be saved, but then would’ve floated around in the outskirts of the Nonex for the rest of my life. That place wasn’t fun, let me tell ya.”

Tick’s mom shook her head, looking half sad, half angry. “Jane and Chu appeared at the same time, lying on the same spot you did. The women didn’t know that *you* were the one who’d opened up a doorway so they could reach them in the first place. Not that they would’ve done anything to return the favor—who knows?—but as soon as those two appeared, the almighty Ladies of Blood and Sorrow were done, totally ignoring our pleas to keep helping us so we could pull you in.”

“Where did they go?” Tick asked. “Jane and Chu.”

Lisa spoke up. “Mistress Jane marched off, her fancy red mask all scrunched up in anger. You’d think she’d have been happy after all that.”

“And Chu?”

Lisa glanced at their mom, who provided the answer. “He had a crazy look in his eyes. He said he finally knew how to ‘finish his plans.’ I think that’s how he put it. Then he disappeared, winked away before the Ladies could stop him. Maybe he had people waiting for his signal to reappear back in the Realities.”

Tick swallowed, realizing with a lump in his throat that *he’d* been the one

who'd provided the opportunity for Reginald Chu—one of the most dangerous men in the Realities, who'd proven he wanted nothing but power at any cost—to come back from a prison he could've never escaped alone.

“Maybe I shouldn't have done that,” Tick whispered.



Rapping at the Door

Master George lay his head back on the pillow, almost ashamed at how good it felt. He and Rutger had been working tirelessly for hours and hours, searching through all the data and reports from Mothball and Sally. Things were looking grim. Everywhere.

But the worst of it was what they *didn't* know. The disastrous results of Jane's meddling with dark matter had done something to the Realities. Something terrible. A lasting, lingering effect that they didn't quite understand yet. It had to do with links between the dimensions that weren't supposed to be there—rifts in the fabric of Reality appearing out of nowhere and killing people. Reports of gray fog and lightning and terrible thunder. George could scarcely hope they'd be able to *understand* it, much less do anything about it.

But even the greatest minds needed rest. Even his. The lights were off, the bed soft, the pillow even softer. Muffintops—the best cat ever—was snuggled against his chest. If he could just sleep for one solid hour. That would do wonders for his—

Someone started pounding on his door, solid thumps with a squeezed fist, by the sound of it. George yelped, and Muffintops screeched, clawing him as she dug in her claws then jumped onto the ground. George's heart was practically lodged in his throat. The knocking continued without stopping.

Of course, it could only be Rutger.

“What *is* it?” George yelled from his bed. “Rutger, stop that incessant pounding! This instant!”

Rutger didn't stop, and was, in fact, saying some muffled words that George couldn't hear over the knocking. Sighing, he flipped off his covers and headed for the door, his disappointment at missing a nap overshadowed by dread. As excitable as Rutger was, he wouldn't be making this much fuss unless something bad had happened.

When George ripped open the door, Rutger almost fell down as his arm swung forward for another rap on the wooden door that was no longer there. He righted himself and looked up at his boss. George's heart lifted when he

saw the huge smile on the little man's face.

"What is it?" George asked. "Goodness gracious me, you just about gave this old bear a heart attack!"

Rutger was breathing heavily, and he fought to control it. After starting and stopping several times, he finally got the words out, "Master Atticus is back! Tick is back! I've spotted him in the Thirteenth Reality, safe and whole and sound!"

George sucked in a gulp of air. "You're certain? No doubt?"

"Really? You really have to ask that?" Rutger's round face showed mock offense at first, but then he grinned.

"No, my good man, no, I don't. So, where is he then? Why haven't you winked him here straightaway? I want to see the boy!"

Rutger's smile vanished. "I tried. Something's blocking me. I think Jane must be keeping him in the Thirteenth Reality as a prisoner."

Master George's hands squeezed into fists at his sides. "Not this time. Jane is *not* going to interfere with us this time. Contact Sato. He and his army are already in that Reality."

Rutger turned to move, but George stopped him with his hand. "And get the others, too. We *need* to be together. Master Atticus could provide us just the lift we need. Finally, things are looking up."

Rutger smiled, then hurried off to follow his orders, his frantic waddle down the hall making Master George very proud indeed.



Tick, his mom, and Lisa had grown quiet, all talked out about the craziness of pulling Tick back from the Nonex. Now they sat with their backs against the black rock of the wall, the Great Hall empty and dark. A tray of dirty dishes and crumpled napkins sat on the floor next to the wall. Mordell had kept her promise to bring them something to eat. As well as her promise to keep them prisoner. Occasionally a fangen or another creature would pass by the opening to the chamber, just to make sure they knew leaving wasn't an option unless they wanted to be ripped to shreds or eaten.

Tick had been feeling guiltier by the minute. What had he done? How could he have been so selfish? He knew he needed all the Chi'karda he could summon to break free from the Nonex, so he'd used Chu and Jane. But he hadn't thought ahead to the fact that he'd be bringing the two worst enemies of the Realities back to their realms and giving them the opportunity to wreak havoc once again.

How could he be so stupid! He should have sacrificed himself and stayed in the Nonex, knowing those two monsters would be prisoners for the rest of

their existence. He'd broken them free—or, at least helped it get started—just so he could come back, live his life, see his family again. The guilt ate away at his insides and made his stomach feel full of acid. And, of course, his mom could tell. She was a mom, after all.

“Atticus Higginbottom,” she said, breaking the silence that had grown like a living entity, filling the room with something even darker than the air. “I know what you’re thinking over there, and I want you to stop immediately. Do you understand me?”

Tick looked at her and tried to hide the despair that crawled inside of him. “What? I’m fine.”

“You’re fine, huh? And I’ve got bananas growing out of my ears. Nonsense, son. I know it’s hitting you that Jane and Chu are freed from the Nonex. But it’s not your fault. Who knows? Maybe they would’ve figured out a way to escape on their own eventually. It’s what they do, how they got to where they are. They are masterminds, deceivers, manipulators, schemers. And *they* would’ve left *you* behind. The choices they make in life are not yours to bear. You did the right thing saving them. Maybe . . . maybe they’ll change. Realize their mistakes and make them right.”

Tick laughed, shocking himself just as much as the others. “Mom, now I *know* you’re just trying to make me feel better. You heard for yourself what Chu said before they winked his power-hungry behind out of here. And Jane *had* her chance to become good. I ruined *that* when I melded her body to several pounds of metal. For somebody who was recruited to help the Realitants, I’ve sure done a great job of messing it all up.”

His mom’s eyes had welled up with tears, and she came over to sit next to him. She tried to pull him into her arms, and at first he resisted, but then he figured he could use some good old-fashioned mom-love and hugged her back. Fiercely.

“Listen to me,” she whispered to him. “I’m your mom. I love you more than any human has ever loved a child before. Do you understand that?”

Tick nodded but didn’t say anything. He was trying to hold back the tears.

Lisa was a few feet away, looking down as if she didn’t feel like she had a right to hear this conversation.

“You did the right thing, Atticus,” his mom continued. “Can you imagine—keeping a boy away from his mom? From his dad? From his sweet sisters? You did what you had to do to come back here, because you felt our love pulling you. You felt it across the universe and all the Realities and the barriers of the Nonex, because it’s that powerful. You had no choice, son. Love is more powerful than Chi’karda, and you had to obey its call. We need you. Your family needs you. Nothing could keep us apart. Nothing will.”

“Okay, Mom.” Tick didn’t really know what to say, but he squeezed his mom even tighter, not caring if he seemed like a two-year-old kid. “Thanks.”

“And one more thing,” she said. “You didn’t just bring back two bad guys. You brought back *you*. Someone who has more power over Chi’karda than anyone in history. Even Mistress Jane. The Realities need you, Atticus. They need *you* more than they *don’t* need them. Clear?”

“Clear.”

Her words really affected him. Lying around feeling sorry for himself wasn’t going to be the answer. He needed to be ready to take action. He swore to himself that he’d be prepared. He’d study and learn and practice. And if the day came that either one of his enemies tried to hurt the worlds again, he would stop them. He swore it.

“I love you,” he whispered to his mom.

The shuffle of feet drew their attention to the entrance of the chamber. Mordell, the long and lanky Lady of Blood and Sorrow, stood with her hands folded in front of her.

“I supposed you’ve had your time to rest and eat,” the woman said. “But it’s over now. At least for Atticus. Mistress Jane would like to see you, boy. She says it’s high time you two spoke about the Fourth Dimension.”



A Ribbon of Shiny Silver

Sato stood atop the rock that jutted from the hilltop, allowing himself to finally enjoy a moment to himself. The land fell away in all directions, flowing with green grasses and thorny shrubs and leafless trees. Autumn had come to this area of the Thirteenth Reality, and there was a bite to the air that made Sato shiver. Far below him was a river that cut through the valley like a shiny silver ribbon, disappearing into a forest and the mountains beyond.

Somewhere along that river was the castle of Mistress Jane.

It had taken only a couple of days for his army to clean up the few scattered creatures left behind at the evil lady's Factory, otherwise known as the house of horrors. It was where Jane had used her frightening mix of science and magic to create mixed breeds of animals. Humans had been next on the list for her experiments, until the ones she was holding prisoner had been rescued by Sato and the Fifth Army.

All of them but ten.

Sato would never know the faces of the ten people he'd had to leave behind when the destruction became too much. Ten people left to die, crushed by stone and earth. He couldn't blame Master George and Rutger—they'd done what needed to be done. If Sato and Mothball had stayed to rescue those last few people, there would have been twelve dead bodies instead of ten. But that didn't change the fact that their loss haunted him day and night. If only he had been a little faster . . .

But here he was. Back in the Thirteenth again. They had hunted down any creatures of Jane's they could find around the ruins of the Factory, and something told him that any that were left were heading for the castle. He knew he was right after having received word from headquarters that Tick was now imprisoned there, along with his mom and sister.

Tick's sister—Lisa. Sato kind of liked that girl.

He shook his head, ashamed of himself. What a stupid thing to think at the moment. First of all, he couldn't believe that Tick was back, safe. *There* was a story he was dying to hear. And second, he hated to hear the words *Mistress Jane* again. Hated it. She'd killed his parents, burned them alive,

right in front of his young eyes. He dreamed of it every night. The only silver lining was that maybe he'd finally get his chance for payback—at *his* hand, not Tick's.

A voice behind him interrupted his thoughts. "Master Sato, we're waiting for word on what we do next."

Sato turned to see an enormously tall man with thin features, his black hair hanging in straggles, his face gaunt, his clothes raggedy. But Sato knew that no one should ever make assumptions based on the appearance of these warriors from the Fifth Reality. They could break a man in half with two fingers.

He especially liked this one, Mothball's very own dad. "Gather them up, Tollaseat. We're marching for the castle. For Tick. For *Mistress Jane*."



Tick didn't put up much of a fight. With Jane's monsters hovering around outside the Great Hall, Mordell looking as if she'd bite anyone who gave her any trouble, and—most of all—out of pure curiosity, he decided to calmly walk with the old woman to where Jane waited for him.

They'd come out into the long underground passage that went along the river, the same place where Tick had used his own power to wink himself and his friends away from the fangen attack during their first visit to the Thirteenth Reality. More of those creatures lined the wall now as he and Mordell walked past them, their thin wings folded in, their fang-filled mouths closed, their yellow eyes glaring at him. Tick felt a nauseous chill in his gut.

It wasn't long before he began to see the extent of the castle's destruction. Walls had caved in. Huge chunks of rock had been torn loose from the ceiling and crashed to the ground, breaking the stone floor and creating spider webs of cracks everywhere. It got worse the farther they went; soon they were walking through a maze of debris. Tick looked in horror at some spots that appeared as if one puff of breath would cause the whole structure to come tumbling down on top of them.

They eventually reached an arch that exited into a dark staircase, narrow steps spiraling up to heights Tick couldn't see. Dust covered the steps, but the walls seemed solid enough. Mordell didn't say a word the entire time, just led him toward the upper reaches of the castle.

Tick was out of breath when they finally came to a wooden door.

Mordell stopped and looked at him with a grave face. "These are not the usual quarters of our master. The destruction caused by"—her eyes narrowed, and Tick knew she'd been about to say that it was all his fault—"the Great Disturbance made quite an impact on our grand castle. Mistress Jane takes her place here until all can be repaired. Wait until I beckon you to enter."

She rapped lightly on the wooden door three times. A few seconds later, it opened, and another woman in a hooded robe stared out at them. She nodded then allowed Mordell to step inside, shutting the door in Tick's face.

Tick was tempted to knock on the door himself—or better yet, just open it up and waltz inside. He wasn't nearly as scared of seeing Jane as he'd been in the past; his progress in the powers of Chi'karda had given him more confidence than ever before in his life. Forcing patience on himself, he stood and waited, knowing that Jane would probably make him wait awhile just to anger him.

He was right. At least fifteen minutes went by while he stood and stared at the walls and steps of the staircase. But just in case Jane was spying on him somehow, he refused to show his frustration or annoyance. He merely waited.

Finally, the door swung open. Mordell was standing there.

"In normal days, our master would disintegrate the wood, inspect you with snooper bugs, make a show of her great powers. But she says she is tired and weak, and that she expects understanding from you. Times are not as they once were."

Tick was surprised by the woman's words and shocked that Jane would dare show weakness, much less admit it outright. Not sure what to say, he shrugged, doing his best to act like it meant nothing to him either way.

"Then come." Mordell swung the door wide, and Tick stepped into a small chamber that led to another opening. Beyond that was a sparsely furnished room with a couch and a few chairs, a small window looking out on the fading light of day.

Jane was lying on the couch, the hood of her yellow robe pulled up over her head, her red mask set in a blank expression. With one of her scarred, withered hands, she motioned for Tick to sit down on a chair near her. He did so, wondering anxiously what she wanted to talk to him about.

"The Fourth Dimension," he said first, skipping the formalities. "This lady says you want to talk to me about the Fourth Dimension. Why?" His voice was naturally curt and devoid of feeling when he was around this woman. What kind of a person had he become to feel such things?

Jane sat up straighter and looked at him through the eyeholes of her mask. "You did something terrible, Atticus. Something really, really terrible."



Jane's Talk

Tick didn't need one more thing to feel guilty about, and for once he'd been taken by surprise. Here he was, in the castle of Mistress Jane, the woman who had planned to suck the life out of human children and use it to create monstrous creatures, and she was telling *him* that he'd done something terrible.

"And what exactly is it that I've done?" Tick asked.

Jane grunted as she swung her legs around off the couch and placed her feet on the floor, sitting upright. Her artificial face still had no expression. "My castle, Atticus. It's not a pretty sight. My beautiful room atop the palace is now nothing more than a pile of rocks crushed on top of other rocks. My castle—other than a few spots like this one and the Great Hall—lies in ruins. Most of my servants were killed. My most faithful and trusted servant, Frazier Gunn, is nowhere to be found. My body is weak, and my mind is tired. And here I sit before you now."

Tick didn't see where this was going at all. "What does that have to do with me?"

"My point, Atticus Higginbottom, is that I'm not in any mood to fix the problems you've created for the Realities. Not in a mood at all."

"Tell me, what horrible thing did I do again?" Tick was surprisingly curious.

Her mask melted into a frown. "When I used the Blade of Shattered Hope, Atticus, I was trying to do something that would benefit humanity in the long run. You saw only the short-term point of view—the destruction of an alternate reality—but it was a vital step forward on a journey toward a final and perfect Utopia. Eternal happiness for the rest of mankind's existence. You did *not* understand!"

Tick's anger flared. "Don't sit there and preach to me! There's not a rational person alive who would call anything you've done *good*. You'd have to be totally insane, which I think you *are*. So I guess it makes sense."

"Insolent boy," Jane muttered harshly, like an expelled breath of frustration.

“And you still haven’t told me what I did that was so terrible.”

“You cracked open the Fourth Dimension!” Jane yelled, standing on her feet as she did so. “You’ve unleashed a force that we hardly understand! And for all your noble talk about saving people, you’ve done the worst thing possible! The very energy that created the universe is now on the verge of exploding outward to do it all over again.”

Her red mask was pinched in vicious anger, her eyebrows slanted like crossed swords. And her scarred hands were squeezed into fists as she breathed in and out heavily. “I knew it as soon as I got back. I’ve always known there was a link between the Chi’karda here and the mysteries of the Fourth Dimension. Your battle with me, and the unprecedented amounts of Chi’karda we unleashed, broke that link, Atticus. Every single one of the Realities is in an enormous amount of trouble. All the earthquakes and tornadoes and destruction will seem like the good old days soon enough.”

Tick realized with a sinking stomach that Jane was telling him the truth.

“Look, I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he said. “Just sit down and relax. Neither one of us is going anywhere.”

“Sit down and relax?” Jane repeated, as if he’d told her to eat a live rat. But she sat down anyway, folding back into the soft cushions of her couch. “There’s no time for relaxation, boy. I first suspected something was wrong when we were in the Nonex and I saw the rift in the air that led to another world. Another Reality. For that rift to reach the Nonex, I knew it wasn’t as simple as a pathway between worlds. It had to be something much deeper. And then there was the incident with the earthquake and the subsequent uptick of craziness.”

Tick knew that the Nonex was a place where a gorilla could suddenly erupt out of the sand, then turn into a moth and fly away. All kinds of unexplainable stuff happened all the time, but Jane was right. The craziness had ratcheted up considerably right before they escaped.

“You do remember the rip in the air I saw?” Jane asked.

“Huh? Oh. Yeah. I do.”

“There was a boy and his father, or perhaps his grandfather, in a forest, looking back at me. And I knew something was off about it, something dangerous. I backed away, and just in time, too. A terrible storm of gray mist and thunderous lightning exploded within that rift, destroying whatever was close by on both sides of the rift. You saw what the area looked like afterwards.”

Tick remembered. It had reminded him of TV footage of a tornado’s aftermath. “So you’re saying that what you saw was the Fourth Dimension?”

“A better way to put it is that I saw what comes *out* of the Fourth

Dimension. The Void of Mist and Thunder. It's always been a rumor, a myth—pure speculation. Until now. I believe the Void is a living thing, but without conscience. The complete and pure power of creation. All it wants is to escape its prison and consume everything in its path. It's mindless and hungry."

"How do you even know about it? You already have a name for it, but you never told anyone about it. Why not?" Tick felt sick inside. Here was yet another thing that had gone wrong. And somehow it linked back to being *his* fault.

"I'm old," Jane said. Her red mask had returned to a blank expression, but Tick knew anything could set her off. "I've researched the origins of our universe in hopes of making it better. That crotchety old George and I worked on this project together, years ago. Trust me, I'm sure he's figured out what's going on by now and is sweating a river."

"What is the Fourth Dimension?" Tick asked. "I still don't really get it." He hated admitting that to her, but he had no choice.

"Well, you know what 3-D is, correct? Three dimensions?"

"Yeah."

"Well, the Fourth is named that because it's a step beyond anything we understand in terms of vision and . . . placement. Three-D is exponentially greater than 2-D. And the Fourth is infinitely greater than 3-D. The power of the Void is much, much greater than any kind of energy we know in our own dimension. If unleashed, it will consume this world like food and use it to recreate another. And all of us will die along the way."

Tick almost wanted to laugh. "You're really clearing things up."

The mask flashed to anger. "Stop it. Now. None of your childish sarcasm, do you understand me? What I'm talking about is very serious. More deadly than even my Blade of Shattered Hope. *Do you understand?*" She shouted the last question, making Tick lean back in his chair. "It was your meddling with that Blade that ripped open the Fourth Dimension in the first place!"

"Okay, I get it." Tick was scared, but he didn't want to show it. "But this isn't the first time you've tried to work with me. The last time ended with you trying to choke me to death. Remember?"

"Oh, Atticus." The anger and spirit seemed to drain straight out of Jane, her shoulders slumping and her mask melting into another frown. "Do you still really believe I was trying to kill you that day? We had to stop Chu, and at the time, hurting you was the only way to get you to release your Chi'karda. You couldn't do it at will like you can now."

Tick looked at the floor. Jane confused him so much. She seemed to have some good in her, but she'd also done some terrible, awful things. But could

he really blame her completely after what *he'd* done to *her*?

“I don’t know what to do,” he said quietly. He was tired of thinking. “I just don’t.”

“Atticus,” Jane said, her raspy voice quiet, like a small clearing of the throat. “I’m not going to sit here and pretend that you and I are best friends. I resent you for what you did to me, though I know it was partly out of your control. I *know* you hate me. And I’m not making any promises to stop fighting for a Utopia for mankind. When this issue is dealt with, I’ll continue with my mission. I will do whatever it takes.”

Tick looked up sharply. “You will, huh? You’ll go right back to destroying entire worlds and throwing little kids into awful experiments? No skin off your back, right?”

Jane pounded a fist on her knee. “Yes! I will do whatever it—”

Her words were cut off by the door slamming open, the entire room seeming to tremble. Jane and Tick both shot to their feet to see who had come in.

It was Mordell, and her face was pale with fright.

“The Fourth Dimension has torn open outside the castle,” she announced in a shaky voice, as if she had to avoid shouting to preserve the dignity of her order. “The Void is attacking our creatures.”



Fog and Thunder

Lorena had been holding Lisa in her arms—the girl had finally dozed off—when she heard the terrible sound in the distance. It was like a great, rushing wind, with cracks of thunder splintering it. And then she heard the screams. Unnatural screams that she knew came out of the mouths of Jane’s creatures.

Lisa’s head popped up immediately, her chance at slumber gone. “What is that?”

“I don’t know, sweetie.” Lorena’s heart picked up its pace, and a swell of panic bulged in her chest, making it hard to breathe. If something was making those awful monsters scream, then what would it do to *them*?

She heard the scuffle of feet running along the passage outside the Great Hall. Grabbing Lisa’s hand, she stood up, and the two of them went over to the arched exit to investigate. The two fangen that had been assigned to guard them were gone, and dozens of creatures were frantically scurrying past the opening, *away* from the shattered door that led outside to the castle grounds. Any noise of their passage was drowned out by the sounds of thunder crashing and booming, which were getting louder.

“What on *earth*?” Lorena whispered, barely hearing herself. She looked at Lisa, whose eyes were wide and scared.

“It sounds like a storm!” her daughter yelled to her. “But how could it be hurting all those people?”

“You mean *creatures*.” Lorena shook her head. “It has to be something more than a storm.”

“Let’s go look!” Lisa shouted.

Lorena frowned at her, thinking her daughter had surely gone nuts. That, or she was still young enough to let curiosity overrule common sense.

Lisa pulled her mom closer and spoke into her ear. “If it’s not just a storm, and if it’s hurting the *bad* guys, then it must be on *our* side. We need to find out who or what it is and let them know that Mistress Jane has Tick!”

Lorena had started shaking her head before Lisa even finished. “No

way!”

“But this is our chance! No one’s guarding us!”

“No way,” Lorena repeated. But then she peered into her daughter’s eyes and saw that courage had replaced the fear to a degree. Motherly pride filled her chest and made her change her mind. “Okay, maybe just a peek. But we stop when I say so. Do you understand?”

Lisa smiled, a pathetic little effort. “Okay. I promise.”

Like two spies, they slipped out of the Great Hall and ran down the passage alongside the internal stream, toward the broken door and the gray wall behind it.



Sato pulled up short when he saw the strange anomaly appear right in front of the castle. They’d been marching for several hours, the sun sinking toward the forest on the horizon, the Fifth Army like a slow-moving tsunami behind their leader. Sato had promised them that one day soon, they’d return to the Fifth Reality and take back their world from the Bugaboo soldiers who’d gone insane and ruled with crazed minds.

But for now, the army was pledged to help the Realitants get things back in order. And before even that, Sato wanted to see his friend Tick again. See him safe and sound.

They were cresting the rise of a hill, the land sloping below them toward the castle, when Sato saw something that made no sense, made him doubt his own eyes. Made him wonder if they’d been working too hard and his mind was on the fritz.

Starting at a spot about fifty feet above the ground, close to the ruined castle itself, the air seemed to rip apart like a burst seam, the blues and whites and greens of the world replaced by a stark and empty grayness that spread in a line toward the grasses below. Lightning flickered behind the torn gash in reality, and even from where he stood a mile or so away, Sato could hear the rumbles of thunder. Not just hear it—the noise made the ground tremble and his head rattle.

Tollaseat stepped up beside him. “There’s been rumors of the like, there ’as. Fabric of the world rippin’ apart and whatnot. Sendin’ out destruction for the poor blokes who might be standin’ nearby.”

Sato nodded. He’d heard some of the soldiers whispering about it, but seeing it in person sent a wave of unease through his bones and joints. There was something terribly unnatural about it, and he knew it meant trouble.

“What should we do, sir?” Tollaseat asked. His voice revealed a trace of fear, but Sato knew the man and his fellow soldiers would storm the odd thing if he asked. Which he did.

“We need to know what that is,” Sato said, hearing the strong command in his own speech. “And we need to save Tick. One mission has become two.”

Tollaseat clapped him on the back. “We’ll roll it up and bottle it, we will. Take it back to old Master George with a wink and a smile.”

“That we will,” Sato agreed. “Let’s move out.”

The Fifth Army started marching down the hill.



Tick felt weird following Mistress Jane down the long, winding staircase. He felt weird about being around her at all. He was pretty sure two mortal enemies had never acted like this before, trying to kill each other one week, then chitchatting about the world’s problems before scurrying down some steps to investigate a bunch of noise and fog the next.

He *was* curious. Was it a coincidence that the Void Jane had spoken of—this beast of the Fourth Dimension that represented some kind of pure and powerful energy—would attack her castle just as they had begun to scheme against it? Or did it have more of a mind than Jane thought?

They reached the bottom of the stairs and stumbled out into the main passageway, which was flanked by a narrow river on one side and the castle’s interior stone wall on the other. It was a scene of chaos. Creepy chaos. Dozens of Jane’s creatures, mostly fangen, were running pell-mell along the pathway, many of them wounded, some falling into the water. If the creatures started chasing him, he thought he’d die of fright before he could even think to use his newfound powers. But they all just kept fleeing, heading deeper into the castle.

Jane stopped to assess the situation, looking in the direction from which all of her creatures had fled. Tick did the same, but all he could see was a gray light. A rumble of something loud and booming came from there.

“Come!” Jane yelled, sprinting toward the odd light and the noise. Her robe billowed out as she ran, and her hood fell back, revealing the scarred horrors of her head, where her hair had once grown healthily. Feeling another pang of guilt, Tick followed her.



Lorena pulled up short about a hundred feet from the jagged edges of the broken door, stopping Lisa with an outstretched arm. No matter how much bravery they’d found, the loss of caution would be absurd. They could see better now, and Lorena wanted to understand what they were running toward.

A mass of churning gray air hovered behind the wide opening of the doorway like clouds that boiled before unleashing torrents of rain. Streaks of

lightning sliced through the grayness, illuminating the world in brilliant flashes of white fire. The thunder that pounded the air was deafening, making Lorena's ears feel as if they were bleeding. All the fangen and their cousins had either fled or lay on the ground around the door, battered and dead. Which made her wonder what she and Lisa thought they were doing coming this close to the danger.

The booming sounds stopped so suddenly that Lorena's ears popped, and the silence was like cotton that had been stuffed in her ears. There was the slightest buzz of electricity in the air, and the gray clouds behind the door were now full of tiny bolts of electricity, a web of white light. Lisa was about to ask something, but Lorena shushed her. Things were changing.

The churning, smoky cloud began to coalesce into sections, filtering and swirling, as if some unseen hand had begun to shape the substance like putty. Soon there were gaps in the mist, the green grass and blue sky shining through from beyond. The gray fog continued its shaping until several dozen oblong sections stood on end, scattered around like a crowd of ghosts. Then heads formed as the misty substance solidified into slick, gray skin. Arms. Legs. Eyes full of burning fire.

Oddly enough, they were roughly the shape of some of Mistress Jane's creatures that Lorena had seen fleeing. Though these were bigger and more crudely formed.

The one closest to Lorena started walking toward her.



The Voids

Sato was about a hundred yards away, Tollaseat and the rest of the Fifth Army right behind him, when the mass of fog and lightning in front of the castle started to shift and take shape. *Dozens* of shapes, bigger than most men, were continually refining themselves, their edges sharpening, until they looked like Mistress Jane’s creatures. Arms, legs, wings, the whole bit.

Sato realized he’d stopped without meaning to.

“What bloody kind of business is that, ya reckon?” Tollaseat asked him from behind, a deadly whisper that fit the mood.

“I have no idea,” Sato answered. “But there can’t be anything good about it. We need to get there. Come on!”

Sato burst into a sprint, and his soldiers followed, their feet pounding on the grass like the hooves of a hundred horses.



Tick rounded a bend and finally came into view of the busted door through which he’d been before, a long time ago. Outside of it, dozens of gray shapes that roughly resembled Jane’s creatures stood in the fields beyond the castle walls. He couldn’t quite compute what was happening—they looked *similar* to what Jane had created, but they were also bigger, and . . . *different*. More humanoid.

The few figures in the front were walking forward, through the door. Their eyes shone with brilliant displays of fire, as if they were windows into a furnace. Tendrils of lightning shot across the surface of their slick, colorless skin.

Then Tick saw two people standing between him and the oncoming creatures.

“Mom!” he yelled, breaking into a run to reach her. “What in the world are you doing out here?”

She turned to face him, as did Lisa, and Tick’s heart broke a little when he saw the fear in their eyes and expressions.

“We’re trying to figure out . . .” his mom began to shout, but didn’t

finish. She pulled Lisa behind her and came toward Tick until they met. “It hardly matters. What are those things?” She gestured to the briskly walking gray people about fifty feet away.

Mistress Jane joined Tick, her red mask staring with a slight look of awe at the oncoming ghostly figures. The fire of their eyes reflected off the shiny, wet-looking surface of the red metal covering her hideous face.

Tick felt a shiver of panic, but he knew he had to put on a brave front for his family. “It has something to do with the Fourth Dimension breaking into our Reality. It’s pure energy, so maybe it can take things from our world and recreate them. Don’t know, though. Come on.”

He pointed down the passageway. The creatures were coming straight for them, marching with purpose. Their faces had no distinctive features—just eyes full of flame. Their arms and legs bulged with gray muscle, and their shoulders and chests were broad, but the wings—on those that had them—were misshapen and barely hanging on. Trickle of electricity continued to dance across the surface of their skin.

The Voids—that’s how Tick thought of them, no other word coming to mind—had reached them and stopped. Now fully inside the castle, they lined up in several rows that reached back dozens of feet. There had to be at least fifty of the things. Eyes of fire, gray skin charged with lines of white lightning. But they were still now, staring at Tick and the others.

Mistress Jane spoke in a whisper. “The Fourth Dimension is even more powerful than I thought. What has it done to my sweet, sweet creations?”



When the gray creatures started entering the castle, Sato’s urgency picked up even stronger. Tick was in there somewhere, and these things looked like nothing but trouble.

He sprinted harder, hearing the thumping of his soldiers at his heels. They reached the torn land where the spinning mass of gray air had churned up the soil and ruined the grass. Sato ran across it, taking care not to trip over the divots and chunks of dirt. The inside of the castle was dark, but an eerie orange light shone from somewhere. Sato wondered if it might be coming from the faces of the creatures themselves, but they all had their backs to him at the moment.

Sato stopped at the threshold of the huge entrance and held up a hand. Tollaseat and the others stopped on a dime, and not a peep came from anyone.

The gray monsters had quit walking, and they huddled close together, watching something on the other side. Sato couldn’t see over their heads.

“Come on,” he whispered.

Trying his best to make no noise, skulking on the front pads of his feet,

he moved forward, approaching the back of the pack. He was about ten feet away when one of the creatures turned around sharply to face them. Sato was shocked to see that the thing had two wide eye sockets filled with flickering, hot-burning flames. It was like the inside of its head was a forge, ready to heat up some iron for sword-making.

“What in the name of—” Tollaseat started, but further movement by the gray man cut him short.

A mouth was opening in the gray face, the gap also full of fiery flames, red and orange. It expanded until the upper edge almost touched the eyeholes, an entire face looking in on an inferno. The creature’s long, thick arms ended in stumps that looked way too much like fists coiled in anger. But then the gray man stopped moving. He held that strange, menacing pose with its oven of a mouth stuck in a huge yawn.

Sato didn’t know whether he should attack. He knew nothing about this enemy, or whether it really *was* an enemy. And if it was, he didn’t know what kinds of power it had to fight them back. But he had to do *something*.

As he slowly took a few steps toward the creature, Sato’s right hand reached down inside his own pocket and fingered one of the cool, round balls that were nestled in there. He pulled one into his grip, then out of his pocket. It was a Rager, its trapped static electricity bouncing to get out and destroy things.

The gray man started to growl, like a whoosh of air had ramped up the fire in his head.



Tick had been thrilled when he noticed Sato and his Fifth Army come marching through the broken door, many of the soldiers holding Shurricks, those deadly weapons of sound. Sato disappeared from sight—he was shorter than the Voids standing outside—but the heads of people of the Fifth Reality rose above the creatures, and their faces were mixed with awe and excitement. Not much fear.

All of the Voids had opened their mouths wide, fire raging within, their faces slightly angled toward the ceiling of the passage. Their arms were rigid at their sides, stumpy fists on the ends, wilted wings hanging off their backs. A low groaning sound came from the rear of the pack, like the roar of an airplane’s engine as it started up.

The whole scene reminded Tick of a standoff in an old Western movie, and he didn’t like it one bit.

“Mistress Jane,” he said. “If you’ve got some advice, now would be a great time to share it.”

The robed woman stepped forward, seemed to assess the situation for a

few seconds, then turned to face Tick. Her mask had no expression, but the roaring, growling sounds were getting louder and louder.

“I don’t know how to fight this kind of power,” Jane said. “The Fourth Dimension has obviously taken my creations and turned them into a weapon of some sort.”

She’d barely finished her sentence when one of the Voids in the front row ejected something from its mouth—a beam of pure flame, fiery and steaming, like a spout of lava shot from a hose. It flew up, then out, then came down and headed straight for Jane’s head.



Ragers and Squeezers

As Tick dove forward, his shoulders smashing into the side of Jane and tackling her to the ground, somewhere in the back of his mind, he was aware that once again he was saving a person who'd devoted her life to doing evil things. No matter her intent. They crashed to the ground, and Tick felt a hot streak fly above him, almost enough to singe the hairs on the back of his neck.

He rolled off Jane in time to see the short stream of liquid fire sail past the rest of the crowd and hit the wall on the other side of the stream. Instead of splashing like lava, the fire sparked and burst into tiny explosions, crumbling some of the stone. Chips of rock rained into the water. But the weapon—or whatever it had been—left no trace, evaporating into the air with a puff of steam.

Jane and Tick jumped back to their feet, and everyone faced the Voids. Their mouths were still open in firing position, but none of them were doing anything just yet.

“Could it have been a warning?” Tick’s mom asked. “Is there any way we can talk to them? If they’re really from—”

“They *are* from the Fourth Dimension,” Jane interrupted. “And talking to them would surely be a waste of time. I can’t imagine they think like us, talk like us, see the universe like us. Our comprehensions of the Realities are probably as different as those of a spider and a redwood tree.”

“Or more like a human and an ant,” Tick murmured. “Maybe we’re nothing more than something they need to step on.”

Jane shook her head slowly back and forth. “We need to kill them, plain and simple. Atticus, prepare yourself. Pull in your Chi’karda, boy.”

Tick felt a rushing behind his ears, his heart thumping. He turned to Mordell and made sure he avoided eye contact with his family. “Take . . . please take my mom and sister somewhere safe. Please.”

“Atticus Higginbottom!” his mom said, planting her feet and propping her hands on her hips. “We can do just as much—”

Another one of the Voids shot a stream of flame and lava from its mouth.

The fire sliced through the air toward the wall then curved, swinging around to head for Tick's group. Everyone collapsed to the ground—Tick yanking on his mom and sister's clothes—just as the deadly cylinder of bright red and orange flew over them and splashed into the wide stream next to the passage. Sparks and shoots of fire went everywhere as the water boiled and hissed for several seconds. Then it ended.

Tick grabbed his mom and looked her in the face. "Let me do this, Mom. You need to keep Lisa safe. Let me do this!"

Another burst of fire and lava came shooting through the air. This time it was Lisa who shoved Tick and his mom out of the way. The fiery stream slammed into the floor where they'd been lying. Sparks showered onto Tick; he swatted them off his shirt and stamped out the little fires around him.

"Mom!" he yelled. "You have to go! Jane and I can fight them off!"

There was no more argument. Mordell helped his mom and Lisa get to their feet, and then the three of them sprinted back down the passageway, heading for some place Tick hoped would protect them. Maybe the Great Hall. He turned back to the Voids in time to see another stream of fire erupting from a creature's mouth. The lava shot forward in a violent burst, as if the thing wanted it to reach the three fleeing women.

Tick acted without thinking. He triggered something in his heart, deep within his chest, and pulled something out with his mind and soul. A spinning cloud of orange sparkles ignited into existence around his body, and he threw some of it at the flying barrage of fire and lava. They met in midair and erupted into a fireworks show, sparks dropping and dancing on the ground. But it had worked, and Lisa and his mom disappeared around the bend, with Mordell on their heels.

It was Jane and Tick now. They exchanged a glance that somehow said, *Here we go again. Enemies working as allies.*

They stood side by side and faced the army of gray men, the Voids from another dimension. Tick wanted to say something but kept his mouth shut and waited for the battle to begin.



Sato had pulled back his men and women, funneling them through the broken door and onto the flattened grasses outside the castle. Three of the gray men had fired spouts of flame and lava at his army, and one of the attacks had hit home, enveloping a giant woman named Erthell in fire. Two of her companions had thrown her into the river to put out the flames, and then stayed to help her back onto the bank.

Sato wasn't running away either. Without any kind of shield to protect themselves, he wanted to fight back from cover. He and several other soldiers

lined up against the wall outside the entrance to the castle, Shurricks at the ready. Even more soldiers stood right behind them, ready to jump out and throw Ragers and Squeezers—the nasty little grenades with metal hooks that contracted into whatever they hit—at the enemy to cause distraction and pain.

“Ready the volley!” Sato shouted. “As soon as they fly and ignite, we start pounding them with sound. Ready?”

“Ready!” came the roar of their reply. Tollaseat was on the other side of the broken door, and he flashed Sato a wild grin.

“Now!” Sato commanded.

Little balls full of dancing electricity and dozens of Squeezer grenades flew out of his soldiers’ hands, catapulting through the air toward the lines of gray men. At the sight of the volley, the creatures started shooting bursts of lava and fire from their mouths, squirting pure heat in all directions. Some of them hit home, incinerating the Realitant weapons on contact. But some of the weapons got through and exploded, working their magic.

A couple of Ragers hit the ground several feet in front of the first of the creatures, cracking into the rock and collecting debris like shavings to a magnet. It happened so fast, but the process never stopped wowing Sato. The little balls rolled forward in a burst until they weren’t little anymore, becoming great mounds of earth and stone that crashed into the unsuspecting gray men, throwing several to the ground and rolling over them. The ones that died seemed to explode into gray mist and were whisked up into the air, forming a small cloud. Jagged bolts of lightning crackled through the gray masses.

A few of the Squeezers made it through as well, exploding when they hit anything solid, their little metal clips flying in all directions. When they made contact with the gray skin of the creatures, the grenades’ sharp, needlelike ends contracted and squeezed. The monsters roared with pain, flames leaping out of their mouths. The entire castle rumbled from the awful sound of it. One of the creatures was hurt badly enough that it dissolved into mist and flew toward the circling cloud like its companions had done. Several clouds hovered above the castle now.

“Fire the Shurricks!” Sato yelled.

He and his fellow soldiers aimed and obeyed, shooting out blasts of pure sound waves at the creatures. The leading edges of the waves, heavy thumps that were felt instead of heard, flew forward until they slammed into a few bodies of the gray men. Most of them erupted into mist and rose to join the other lightning-laced clouds. But there were still plenty more creatures to fight, and Sato kept shooting.

He caught a glimpse of the battle raging on the other side. Streaks of sparkling orange and thick, gray bodies flew in all directions. Their screams

were like the roars of a blacksmith's forge.

Sato fired his Shurric at the enemy.



Beams of Fire

The battle had begun slowly once Tick's mom and the others were gone. The few shots of fire and lava from the mouths of the Voids were easily blocked by Jane or Tick, taking turns as if they'd done this for years. There seemed to be more action on the other side of the creatures, where Sato and his army had obviously started attacking with some of the Realitant weapons. Tick recognized the sounds of Ragers and Squeezers and that skull-rattling thump of a Shurric. And there were weird cloud shapes of gray mist hovering near the ceiling above—tiny bolts of lightning dancing within.

But then things close by changed.

The entire front row of Voids closest to Tick opened their glowing mouths even wider, and pure flame poured out, gushing with lava and brilliant yellow light. There were at least a dozen perfectly cylindrical geysers of fiery material coming at Tick and Jane like a mass of thick snakes.

Tick threw all his focus into the Chi'karda that burned within him and sent it out in waves to crash against the oncoming heat. There were spectacular explosions and sparks and hisses of flame raining to the ground, bouncing like yellow raindrops. He had to keep his eyes open against the blinding light in order to see what was coming and where to aim his powers. Spots swam in his vision, purple blotches and streaks of black.

He wiped his hands across his face and blinked hard several times. Still the streams of pure fire came at him, and he blocked them, destroyed them. Jane was doing the same, but it was taking every bit of their effort. The point at which Chi'karda and Void-fire met and exploded was getting closer and closer to where Tick stood. He needed to change tactics, shift the advantage.

With a scream and an almost violent push of Chi'karda from his body, he ran forward, blasting away at anything dangerous that came in sight. His sudden movement seemed to take the Voids by surprise; several of them quit shooting their deadly venom. Tick narrowed his eyes, focused all his energy on the bodies of the Voids, and threw his power at them. An almost solid wall of orange sparks erupted from him like a wave, flying forward until it crashed into several gray men. The orange power swarmed around the Voids, picking

them up and tossing their strange forms into the air, sweeping them away like a giant with a broom. Those strange, furnacelike screams tore through the building; the ghostly sound gave Tick the creeps.

He turned to see Jane copying his method, running forward and bringing the attack to the Voids. A wave of Chi'karda shot out from her and sent even more of the gray humanlike creatures toward the ceiling like tossed bags.

Several spouts of Void-fire suddenly came shooting at Tick from the untouched creatures next to the far wall. Without time to react, he dove for the ground and rolled, feeling the impact of the fire hitting the ground near his back. Sparks and chunks of rock sprayed into his skin, needles of pain that made him roll harder and faster. As he spun, there was suddenly a drop below him—the hard floor vanished, and he was in open air. It was like time had frozen just long enough for him to realize that strange fact.

He plunged into the ice-cold waters of the castle river. The freezing liquid bit at every one of his nerves. He gasped for air as he began to right himself and swim back to the stone edge.

Something grabbed him by the ankle and pulled him under.



They were making progress.

Sato called on his soldiers to enter the castle proper, firing away with their weapons as they advanced. The enemy's numbers had been cut in half at least, the gray bodies collapsing into a mist of smoke before swirling up to the high ceiling to form yet another lightning-laced cloud. It was like a storm had gathered in a false sky and rain would fall at any second.

Gray creatures still catapulted up from the ground left and right on the other side of the fray, and Sato began to feel confident they had turned the tide. He kept firing, slamming the sound power of his Shurric into one creature after another. Beams of molten fire continued to shoot all around him; one came straight at Sato, and he dove and rolled to avoid it. He jumped back to his feet and kept fighting, as did the rest of the Fifth.

He heard the sound of splashing to his left. He risked a quick look and saw that Tick was flailing in the water of the river, trying to make his way to the edge. He seemed disoriented, or like he'd forgotten how to swim.

"Cover me!" Sato shouted to his closest soldier.

Sweeping his weapon left and right as he ran, Sato booked it to the river's edge, wary of any arrows of fire that might come his way from the gray men. But the battle seemed almost over—he could see that witch, Mistress Jane, using her powers to destroy the same enemy he fought. That made a million questions tear through his mind—almost made him stop running. Mistress Jane. He couldn't possibly accept that she was on his side.

“Sato!”

He looked down to see Tick’s face in the water, his hand reaching out for him. He was still thrashing as if he might drown.

“Tick!” Sato shouted as he got to his knees, leaning over to see if he could grab his friend’s hand. Tick was about five feet from the river’s edge. “Swim over here!” He looked behind him every couple of seconds to make sure nothing came at him that might dissolve his head in lava.

“Something’s got my foot!” Tick yelled. “A tentacle, maybe! It’s wrapped around my ankle!”

Sato leaned a little farther out and was almost able to grab Tick’s hand. “Just . . . come a little closer!”

Tick didn’t answer, just kept beating at the water with his arms. His body moved a couple of inches, but his hand was still out of reach.

Sato inched forward, his knees now extending past the edge, straining to clasp . . . those . . . fingers.

He made contact and squeezed his fist around Tick’s and pulled, snapping his friend almost a foot closer. But then Tick jerked to a stop, almost causing Sato to tumble into the water. Something definitely had hold of Tick and wasn’t letting go without a fight.

“Kick your body to the right!” Sato yelled as he pulled his Shurric around and took aim. The thing was heavy and hard to hold steady with one hand, but the noise and chaos of the battle still raged, and there was no one to help him. He risked another quick glance behind him and saw fire and gray bodies flying through the air.

Tick was doing his best to follow the order. Sato, with a shaking hand, pointed the Shurric at a spot that seemed clear of his friend and pulled the trigger. A soundless thump rocked the building, and water shot up in great spouts as if a meteor had just splash-landed. Tick suddenly tore loose and swam forward, almost leaping out of the river.

Sato dropped his weapon and grabbed Tick by the torso, pulling him the rest of the way. They collapsed on the ground, both of them soaking wet, sucking in and blowing out deep breaths.

Sato remembered that they could be incinerated at any second. He flopped over onto his stomach and surveyed the scene. Even in the last few seconds, everything had changed drastically.

There wasn’t a gray creature in sight. To his left, Jane was standing stiffly with her arms held out in front of her, looking as haggard as any person Sato had ever seen. Her shoulders slumped, and she was struggling to breathe. Her mask was tilted on her exposed, scarred head, and its expression showed pure exhaustion. To his right, the Fifth Army appeared even more disheveled.

Bodies lay scattered on the floor, many of them horribly injured or dead. Those standing seemed like wilted flowers, hoping for water and sun.

Sato's eyes wandered upward. Dozens of tightly wound clouds of gray mist hovered by the ceiling, lightning flicking and striking both within and between them. He was about to get to his knees, order everyone to flee the castle, when all the clouds suddenly collapsed into one, like some sort of separating membrane had been whipped free. The entire mass began to spin, a whirlpool of thick, gray mist churning in the air. A funnel formed in the middle and started lowering toward the ground. A breeze picked up, grew stronger, whipped at Sato's wet clothes.

Something terrible was about to happen.

"Run!" he screamed. "Everyone get out of here!"



A Mighty Wind

Tick was sopping wet. And freezing cold. His ankle hurt from whatever weird creature had been gripping it, trying to pull him under to his death. He was exhausted from using Chi'karda to defend against those beams of fire and to fight back at the Voids.

But something odd was happening above him. His relief at seeing that the Voids were gone lasted all of two seconds. Looking up, he saw that the small, electricity-filled clouds from earlier had grown in number until they'd gotten too big, collapsing into one giant, churning mass of gray. As the funnel cloud began to lower to the ground, the wind picked up measurably, making his already wet skin grow even colder. When Sato screamed for everyone to run, Tick didn't waste any time pondering the command.

He jumped to his feet, feeling the soggy-ness of his clothes, the weariness of his bones and muscles. Sato grabbed him by the arm and pulled him along as they ran together toward the giant door with its frame of broken wood.

The wind was increasing in speed by the second, whipping the air in a frenzy. Tick's clothes flapped like flags on a speedboat, almost hurting his skin, and it felt as if every one of his hairs might rip out and fly away. The spinning funnel of the gray tornado descended rapidly as Tick and Sato ran, and Tick saw Mistress Jane standing on the other side of it all, motionless.

Her body disappeared behind the tornado as its leading point crashed into the stony floor. Lightning arced and arrowed through the cloud, the rattles of thunder sounding like detonations, deafening. The moment when storm met stone was violent, as if the cloud had been a giant fist of steel smashing down, shards of rock vaulting toward the ceiling from the shattered surface. The entire castle jolted, the floor jumping into the air and crashing back down again. Tick sprawled across the floor, still dozens of feet away from the exit. Others fell all around him, and tiny splinters of stone flew through the air, smashing into people.

Tick felt pinpricks of needles on his cheeks and threw his hands up to protect his face. Struggling against the wind and the still-shaking castle, he stumbled to his feet and leaned forward, making it several steps before he

crashed to the ground again. He caught sight of the funnel that continued to twist like a giant drill digging into the hard earth below the layer of stones it had already destroyed. Rock chips flew in all directions, and with a broken heart, he realized that even more bodies littered the ground, many of them still moving, still trying to get up.

Like him.

He couldn't let this destruction continue. He had to *do* something. It had yet to become his instinct to use Chi'karda, to use his powers to fight instead of running away. But how? How could he fight a giant tornado filled with lightning?

His mind focused on the air around him, on the particles, molecules, atoms. Surrendering to his instincts, he created a wall, a shield from the countless chips of rock flying through the castle like tiny daggers. The wind suddenly decreased, and he saw the rocks bouncing off an invisible barrier inches in front of him. He stood up, his fists clenched, his brain working in overdrive. The exhaustion that had been consuming his body seemed like a distant memory as the pure fire of Chi'karda burned inside of him, raging as strongly as the winds that swirled around his shield did. Speckles of orange swam along his skin and thickened into a cloud, but it didn't obscure his vision. He was looking at the world through different eyes now.

The tornado of gray mist spun, churning like it was digging a hole to the other side of the earth, thickening at its core. Debris spun out from the ground and was caught in the mighty winds until everything was a fog of dust and stone.

Tick needed to help those who hadn't been able to escape. Sato was on his back, his face cut up, his eyes wide as he stared at Tick in disbelief as if he were a freak.

Tick's heart almost broke at the sight, but he knew what he had to do. He threw his hands out, threw his thoughts as well. Sato's body suddenly leaped from the ground and flew like a tossed football, tumbling end over end and out the broken doorway. Tick swept his vision and his hands across the passageway, doing the same thing to each person he saw, whether alive or dead. Body after body catapulted into the air and went sailing through the exit, ripped from the ground as if a giant string had been attached to them, yanked by a puppet master. Tick didn't know how he was doing it, but he did it all the same. Instinct ruled his powers now.

He sent the last few people flying out of the castle. He didn't know if they'd land safely out there, or if they might break bones, or worse, but he knew they'd die if they didn't leave this place; that was all he could do.

When he was finally alone, he turned to face the massive cyclone of fog, its bolts of lightning flickering down the edges and smashing into the stone. It

was almost like the energy from the bolts was trying to help dig the hole even wider. Thoughts rushed through his mind then, wondering if he should just turn and run. The people were safe; they could run or wink away and let this thing do whatever it wanted to do to Jane's precious castle.

She appeared to his right.

Wind tore at her robe as she inched along the far wall of the passageway, her back to the stone as she moved, her red mask tightening into an expression of fear as she stared at the tornado ripping apart the ground. Water had been sucked up into the churning funnel as well, sending a spray of mist in all directions and adding an odd blueness to the gray core. Jane was soaked.

A terrible thought hit Tick. What if this thing really didn't stop? What if the Fourth Dimension kept throwing all of its power into the Realities, growing and growing until it consumed everything? A spinning mass of material as big as the universe? He had to sever the link. Somehow he had to stop this; he knew it without any doubt.

He put out his hand toward Jane, manipulating the world with his thoughts. Her body jumped up into the air and flew toward him, landing right beside him. The look of shock on her mask gave him the smallest bit of satisfaction.

"What are you doing?" she yelled over the terrible noise.

"We have to stop this thing!" he shouted back. "We have to break the link!"

Jane's mask wilted at the suggestion. "I don't know if I can do it! I'm spent, Atticus! I have nothing left in me! I need to rest!"

Tick had to hide his shock. For her to admit to that . . .

"We have to try!"

Jane stared back at him through the eyeholes of her mask. Then she gave him a reluctant nod.

The two of them turned toward the tornado and held out their hands as if they were going to walk in and embrace the spinning thing.

"Try to collapse it!" Jane yelled. "Throw all your Chi'karda into collapsing its mass then we'll blow it apart! We have to hope that ends it and seals the breach into the Fourth!"

"Okay!" Tick screamed, his heart pumping. The power was an inferno inside his chest, and he was ready to unleash it. "Let's do it!"

He pushed his hands toward the spinning beast and released the Chi'karda that had been building and building. Streams of orange fire exploded from his fingertips and into the tornado, getting caught in the spin. Jane was doing the same. Soon the gray funnel was colorful and bright; the

lightning was more brilliant and sharp, the thunder louder.

Tick screamed with the effort as he pushed more and more of his powers at the Fourth Dimension, trying to envision what he wanted, trying to make it happen. His body began to shake, his muscles weak. Chi'karda poured from him and Jane in spouts; the streams were almost the same color as what had come from the mouths of the Voids.

Now everything was shaking—the ground, the castle, his skull. The funnel of the tornado was white-hot, blinding. Impossible noises erupted from its form, and the wind was torrential, ripping away the shield Tick had built around himself.

He screamed again and threw all of his strength into the storm.

There was a sudden concussion of pure energy that ripped away from the tornado like the blast of a nuclear bomb. Tick felt his body be jerked into the air, and then he was flying. What remained of the castle exploded, every last brick of it cracking apart and flying right along with him.

He didn't hit the ground until he'd been thrown a thousand yards. A chunk of rock landed on his head, and all he knew was pain.



Joins and Eardrums

Lorena held Lisa close, and it broke her heart to feel the trembling of her daughter's bones. The girl had always been strong-spirited and tough, but no one could be expected to hide their fear after the last few days of their lives.

Mordell had brought them back to the Great Hall, whispering something about its natural powers and it being the best place to protect them. They found the farthest corner of the chamber carved from black stone and huddled together while Mordell sat nearby; she had a look on her face as if she wanted to be closer but had to maintain her dignity as a Lady of Blood and Sorrow. There wasn't much for the three of them to do except be scared and listen to the sounds of battle.

They were distant, but terrible: the swooshing of fire, screams of pain, shouts of command. Soon it all changed to a great, rushing noise, like wind passing through a narrow canyon, or a tornado. The screams intensified. And then the worst sound—breaking rock. It wasn't the loudest noise, but it made the entire castle quake and tremble. Lorena felt the vibration in her joints and eardrums.

She'd never felt so helpless. Her only son was out there, fighting something that seemed impossible. Something that shouldn't exist. And to add to it, he was fighting alongside the woman who'd tried to kill him and countless others. Atticus was putting his faith in a madwoman. It took every ounce of Lorena's willpower to not run back out that door and try to help her boy—she almost itched from the desire. But she had Lisa to think about. And Edgar and Kayla back home. Atticus could take care of himself—he'd proven it over and over.

And so the battle raged on, the sounds of fire and wind increasing in volume. Lorena could do nothing but sit and hold her daughter and imagine all the awful things that might have happened, or might be happening, to her sweet, sweet son.

Everything changed again in a moment. An instant so terrible and horrifying that Lorena knew she'd never sleep again without it haunting her nightmares.

It was an eruption. A detonation. A thunderclap of sound and movement that shook the Great Hall as if it were nothing but an empty cardboard box. Lorena and Lisa both screamed as they flew across the room, smacking into Mordell and rolling another few feet before coming to a stop. The air was filled with the noise of cracks and booms, as if the entire castle had exploded and collapsed in on itself.

Lorena threw away her caution and scrambled to her feet, trying to set aside the panic that thrust itself through her nerves. She grabbed Lisa by the hand, lifted her to her feet, and ran to the exit of the Great Hall, swaying back and forth as the floor continued to tilt and pitch. She'd just stepped in front of the doorway when she stopped, her heart plummeting. Rock and stone and brick had collapsed into a heap, blocking the arched opening completely. Dust choked the air.

Mordell's voice from behind Lorena made her jump and spin around to see the woman standing there, impossibly looking even more grave than before.

"The Great Hall has survived," the Lady of Blood and Sorrow said. "But I'd guess nothing else has. We're trapped."



Sato was lying on his stomach, his hands held over his head to protect himself from the debris that had been raining down for several minutes. Every inch of his body had been battered and bruised by falling rocks, but luckily, his skull had been spared for the most part. It'd been rough going since everything went haywire inside the castle.

Not to mention the fact that he'd been thrown through the air. Twice.

First when Tick used his powers to pick him up and whip his body out of the castle. Saving him. And second when the castle suddenly exploded, a wave of pure energy erupting from its core and tossing him and the rest of his army hundreds of feet away like they were nothing but dried leaves. That had saved him again, because if he'd been any closer, he probably would've been crushed by larger chunks of stone from the destroyed castle.

And so, he was alive.

He pushed himself to his knees, groaning from the aches and pains that riddled his body. He was woozy too, the dusty grass beneath his knees seeming to bob up and down like the surface of the ocean. What little energy he had, drained right out of him, and he collapsed again, but at least he was able to spin himself a bit and land on his rear end. He could see the rubble that had once been the great castle of Mistress Jane, the woman who had killed his parents.

What had been half-destroyed before now lay in utter ruins. A giant heap

of crumbled stone and wood and plaster. Pieces of the castle lay scattered outward from the main body all the way to where Sato sat and beyond, reaching the forest that wasn't too far behind him. But as satisfying as it was to see the carnage, he felt a tremor in his heart for what still pulsed and throbbed in the middle of the destruction like a beating heart.

The tornado of mist still churned where it had been, with nothing but open sky above it. Except it wasn't much of a tornado anymore.

It was a seething, roiling mass of gray, its billowing surface frothing and foaming before turning back in on itself, leaving little wisps of fog streaming out like some kind of dreary decoration. Lightning continued to flash and strike in huge bolts of brilliant white, the thunder rumbling across the ground and echoing off the wall of trees behind Sato. The mass was probably fifty feet wide and a hundred feet tall. It was still moving in a circular motion, but not as intensely as a tornado anymore. It was like a living thing, devouring the air around it and ever growing, slowly.

Members of the Fifth Army were scattered all over the field, groaning and rubbing their eyes and stiffly testing their joints, looking for injuries. Sadly, some *weren't* moving, and Sato felt the heavy weight of leadership once again. He'd led people to their death.

Something caught his eye as he scanned the area—a body that lay lifeless but wasn't as big as the others. A boy.

Tick.

A blister of alarm popped in Sato's heart as he leaped to his feet and started running, finding strength from some hidden part of his soul. He dodged and maneuvered around soldiers, his eyes focused on his friend, who wasn't moving a muscle, not even a twitch. Sato didn't know if he could take another death of someone so close to him. He was ashamed that he didn't feel quite the same about his army fighters, but this was different. Tick had become not just one of his closest friends, but a symbol of everything the Realitants stood for.

Sato jumped over a prostrate woman of the Fifth then slid onto the grass like a baseball player, coming to a stop right at Tick's head. The first thing he noticed was that his back was rising and falling, ever so slightly. Tick lay on his stomach, his arms spread out awkwardly, as if he'd landed and conked out immediately. But he wasn't dead. Thank the Realities, he wasn't dead.

Sato reached out and gently shook his friend's shoulders. No response.

He grabbed him by the arm and carefully rolled him over onto his back so he could get a good look at him. His eyes were closed, his clothes ripped and filthy, his skin covered in dirt and soot. But most troubling was a huge gash on the side of his head, blood matting the hair down like dark red gel.

“Tick,” Sato whispered, trying to fight back the tears that wanted to pour out. Why? Why did everything in their lives always have to be so terrible?

“Tick,” he repeated. Then he picked him up and slung him over his shoulders, grunting under the weight. He began to walk, though he had no idea where he was going.



Coming Together

Paul walked through the twilight forest of the Thirteenth Reality, Sofia and Rutger to his right, Mothball, Sally, and Master George—using his Barrier Wand like a cane—to his left. No one said a word as they picked their way through the bush and bramble. The massive concussion of sound they'd heard a few minutes earlier was enough to silence anyone for a week. Paul forced his thoughts away from the terrible possible explanations for that sound and concentrated on moving forward.

Ever since he'd returned to the Realitant headquarters, he'd been dying to know what in the world the little button in the box Gretel had given them was for. Old George had sent them to Gretel for a reason, had given them a secret password for a reason, had wanted that box with nothing in it but a plastic green button for a reason. But neither he nor Gretel would tell him what it was supposed to be used for. Phrases like “a need-to-know basis” and “you'll find out soon enough” were thrown around. But that didn't satisfy Paul.

Not one bit.

Oh, well. They had much bigger problems on their hands. There was trouble here in the Thirteenth Reality, and any notion they'd had of getting rest and relaxation was out the window. Master George hadn't needed to tell them that when he said they'd all be winking there to regroup with Sato and find Tick. The situation was surely dangerous.

Paul smiled. It was as if his brain was so used to bad stuff that it wasn't allowing him to focus on the best piece of news he'd ever received in his life. Tick was alive. Tick was back. Now they just had to figure out this mess and get him home safe and sound.

The woods had slowly thinned over the last hundred yards or so, though the air up ahead seemed slightly murky, like a dust storm had passed through recently, which seemed impossible for a place so green and vibrant with life.

“Shouldn't we pick up the pace a little?” he asked the small crowd of Realitants.

“No need for haste, my good man,” came the not-surprising reply from Master George. “Our old friend Jane might have placed a few traps along the

edge of the forest. Won't do us much good to run willy-nilly right into them and spring the things."

Paul was annoyed. "Won't do us much good if we show up and everyone's dead, either."

"Don't talk like that," Sofia said. "He's going to be fine."

Paul heard a deadness in her voice that scared him. He realized that she had already begun the process of accepting that just because Tick was back and alive didn't mean he was okay or safe. Paul didn't look at it that way. If their friend was back, he'd figure out a way to get out of any mess thrown his way. The guy was a freak of nature—in a good way.

"I mean it," Sofia added.

"Sorry," Paul muttered. "I'm just anxious to see him. Help him if he needs it."

She nodded but didn't say anything.

They finally reached a point where the end of the woods was visible, and all of them saw it at once. A person with a body slung over his or her shoulders, stumbling at the last line of trees. Even as Paul watched, whoever it was fell down and out of his view. For the first time, he could focus on the scene beyond. And it was like a scene out of an old war movie.

Dust-choked air. Bodies littering the ground, many moving sluggishly to get up, some not moving at all. Countless chunks of rock and wood strewn about the grassy fields. And past all of that, the closest edge barely in sight, was a big pile of ruins and rubble. Paul had been here before so he knew what it was—Mistress Jane's castle, completely destroyed.

Sofia broke into a run, her feet crashing through the weeds and twigs of the forest floor. Before Paul could follow her, she stopped like she'd seen a big snake. Then she was yelling.

"It's Tick and Sato!"



Tick's head felt like the end of a stubborn nail that refused to go into the wood straight. Like a hammer had pounded on it, bent it, yanked it straight, then pounded it all over again. He was barely aware of someone picking him up, then later falling again. He tried opening his eyes, but the light was like a sunburst right in front of him, stabbing and making the ache in his skull even worse.

Now he lay face-first on a ground that was prickly with twigs and pine straw. He groaned a couple of times to make sure whoever had tried to help him knew he wasn't dead, but even the sound of that went off in his head like clanging church bells. A sudden burst of nausea filled his gut.

Please don't throw up, he thought to himself. *Oh, please don't throw up.*

He heard noises then, shouts and the cricking and cracking of footsteps. It all became a painful blur to him, and he figured it didn't matter much anymore. He hurt, and that was that.

Someone rolled him onto his back, and that was the last straw. He jolted to his elbows and threw up to the side. When he finished, he flopped back flat to the ground and grimaced as a fresh wave of agony punched its way through his skull and down his spine.

"Tick?" said a soft voice. A girl. It took him a few seconds to recognize Sofia's voice, and his heart lifted. "Tick, are you okay?"

He wanted to tease her that she'd just asked him the dumbest question in history, but he figured that raising his voice—even talking at all—would hurt too much. So instead he mumbled something. Not even a real word, just an acknowledgment that he'd heard her. He still refused to open his eyes, terrified of the light.

He heard a crunch of ground covering right next to him and figured someone had knelt there.

"Master Atticus?" That was definitely George, and his heart lifted a little more. "Goodness gracious me, boy. What on earth has happened here?"

"Yeah, man. Quit napping down there and talk to us."

Paul. The relief inside Tick was swelling more by the second. At least his friends were safe, and he wasn't dead. Things could've been a lot worse.

"Really, Paul?" Sofia said. "Even now you have to be sarcastic? Look at that nasty gash on his head. We're lucky he didn't bleed out."

"I'm sure he wanted to hear that," Paul muttered back.

"Sato, what happened?" Master George asked.

Sato too? Tick thought. This was too good to be true. Maybe he was having one of those dreams where you see all your friends and loved ones before you died. That thought jolted him back to reality.

He sat up, the pain like strikes of lightning in his head. "My family. My mom. Lisa. Where . . ."

The pain and nausea were too much. He passed out again.



Lisa was starting to accept the fact that she was about to die.

It surprised her how easily the realization came. Although she felt a terrible sadness, it wasn't really about death itself. It was more about not seeing her dad and Kayla and Tick before she went. At least she had her mom.

They'd been silent for so long now. After a couple hours of trying to

move the rocks and debris that blocked their exit from the Great Hall, they'd finally given up. Almost nothing would budge, and the one chunk of stone they were able to move was instantly replaced by several more from above. There was no sign of daylight in any of the cracks. What an awful way to die. They'd either starve or suffocate.

With cheerful thoughts like those, she'd resigned herself to sit with her mom, holding each other as they waited for the inevitable.

She was just thinking how stuffy the air had become when she heard a scrabbling sound near the exit, as though an animal was trying to burrow its way through the stack of debris. Then there was a crunching, some cracks, and the hollow scrape of stone against stone. Dust billowed out from the mess as rocks began to shift and collapse. Lisa didn't know what to think, but refused to let herself feel any hope as she waited to see what was happening.

Finally a huge section of the rubble shifted and slid away, leaving a huge gap, choked with dust. A robed figure appeared, hunched over and filthy. Mistress Jane stepped into the room, the light from the lone torch barely reflecting off her dirty red mask.

Mordell lost every ounce of her usual reserved demeanor. "Master!" she yelled. "Master, you're alive!"

"For now," she said in her raw, scratchy voice—it sounded weaker than ever. "Come. We have a lot of work to do."



From Head to Toe

When Tick came to his senses again, the pain in his head had lessened a bit. The tiniest, tiniest bit. But the nausea was gone, and it didn't seem like the whole world would swim away from him at any second.

Someone—he didn't know who—helped him sit up. Groggy and dazed, he waited a few seconds before opening his eyes. The light had faded considerably, the orange glow of sunset settling somewhere to the west beyond the trees. The others were sitting around him on the edge of the forest; they could see the long fields of grass, littered with rubble and debris, that led to the utter ruin of what had once been the mighty castle of Mistress Jane. He could just barely see the slowly spinning mass of gray mist that still churned within it. He looked away. He didn't want to look at it or think about it.

He couldn't believe all the people sitting around him. It was like a reunion too good to be true. Mothball, with her scraggly hair and her clothes hanging off her skin-and-bones body, her face lit up by a smile that seemed almost out of place in the gloom of their situation. Rutger, his round body nestled next to her like a fat penguin. Master George, dressed up as always, though his suit was wrinkled and dirty, with a Barrier Wand laid across his lap. Sally, sitting cross-legged in his plaid shirt and overalls like a lumberjack waiting for an order to start cutting down the trees around them.

And then Tick's three best friends, sitting in a row, staring at him like they expected him to give a speech. Sato. Sofia. Paul. They were dressed as if they'd just gotten home from school, but worry etched lines on their faces. Tick didn't know if it was the fading light, but they looked older. They definitely looked older.

And then an emptiness hit him again, hard. It was like he was looking at a portrait of his life, and a big chunk had been ripped out. His family.

A wave of despair almost made him pass out again. "My mom and sister," he said, hearing the panic in his own voice. "I told Mordell to take them somewhere safe. Any idea what happened to them?"

Everyone in the group looked at one another; they didn't need to say anything.

“We have to go look for them,” Tick said, starting to get up.

Master George reached out and put a hand on Tick’s shoulder, gently making him sit back down. “Atticus, none of us even know what *happened*. The castle is completely destroyed, and Sato’s army is just now recovering and counting up their losses. Before we can help you or find your family, we need to know *what* we’re dealing with. A few minutes more won’t change their plight. In fact, the more informed we are, the more we can help them. Do you understand?”

Tick didn’t. For some reason, he was angry. “I’ll go sift through every one of those stones by myself if I have to.”

“You mean they were *inside* the building when it collapsed?” Master George’s face paled.

Tick stood up. “Yes, they were inside. And if you haven’t noticed, there’s a big tornado right in the middle of all that mess. Maybe growing closer to my mom and sister right now.”

“Which is exactly why we need—”

“No!” Tick yelled. “No.”

He was lost and confused by the worry that ate away inside of him, but he didn’t care. He got to his feet and started marching toward the ruined castle, ignoring the pain that lanced through his body from his skull to the bottoms of his feet.



Lisa didn’t like what Jane had gone on to say about the Fourth Dimension and the all-consuming Void it had unleashed. She assumed that it would consume *her* too. But Mistress Jane had said little else—including whether or not Tick was safe. Instead she had rested for a time, eyes closed, until she was ready. Then she started using her fancy powers to move and shift more of the rubble so they could get out of the destroyed castle. Lisa watched, fascinated.

The woman’s robe was a mess, caked with grime and dust, ripped in countless places. Her hood hung off her head like a discarded flag, revealing a scarred mass where her hair should’ve been, the skin red and raw. Lisa knew she was supposed to hate Mistress Jane—the crazy lady who’d killed people and done evil, evil things—but how could you not feel sorry for someone who looked so miserable and probably felt even worse?

But nothing seemed to faze Jane. She held up her wounded hands like Moses parting the Red Sea, and sparkles of orange flew from her body in sprays of bright mist. Grinding sounds filled the air as rock and stone moved at her will, shifting and flying and breaking apart. Dust clogged the air, but she used her power to whisk that away as well, obviously needing to see what

she was doing.

After several minutes of this show, Lisa was expecting to see daylight spill into the room, but it never happened. She had no clue what time it was, and her heart dropped a little to think it might be in the middle of the night. She'd never wanted to see sunshine so desperately, and she was dying to get out there and see if her brother was okay. To see if he'd survived whatever force was trying to "eat this world," as Jane had put it.

Her mom reached out and squeezed her hand as if she'd sensed the thought. "I'm sure he's okay. He has to be. If this witchy woman made it through, I'm sure our boy did too. Don't you worry."

Lisa looked at her mom and forced a smile. "Yeah, I'm sure you're not worrying one bit. Are you?"

"Of course not." She grinned back. "Okay, maybe a teensy tiny bit."

Mistress Jane stopped what she was doing. The fiery orange cloud sucked back into her like something shown in reverse on video, and she lowered her hands. The woman's shoulders slumped as if she'd used every last ounce of her energy. Now that the rock and stone had quit grinding and cracking, Lisa heard another odd sound. Like a rushing wind, with a hum and bulge of power behind it. It reminded her of the heavy thrum of machinery, as if somewhere around the corner was a manufacturing plant still trying to work its way through the landfall of a hurricane.

Mordell had stayed very quiet through the whole ordeal, but now she walked up to Mistress Jane and gently put her hands on her boss's shoulders.

"Are you alright, Master?" she asked in a voice Lisa barely heard over the noise coming from outside. "May I help you sit down?"

Jane turned around, and her mask showed no emotion at all. "My friends. My creatures. I . . . What did the Void do to them?"

Lisa thought that was a strange thing to say and exchanged a confused look with her mom, who shrugged her shoulders slightly then spoke. "What do you mean, Jane? After everything that has happened, the abominations you created are the only thing you're worried about? Do you even care in the slightest that my son could be out there, hurt or dead? *Do you?*"

Lisa's mom had grown angrier with every word and had shouted the last question. She visibly huffed like a bullied kid on the playground.

But Jane seemed to have no reaction. Maybe she was just too weary. "I fear for your son, too, Lorena. I do. But you could never know what it's like to stand here and not sense the presence of hundreds of your own children. The Void took them . . . transformed them somehow."

Lisa's mom took a furious step forward and stopped, as if she realized how crazy it would be to threaten this woman who'd done the magical things

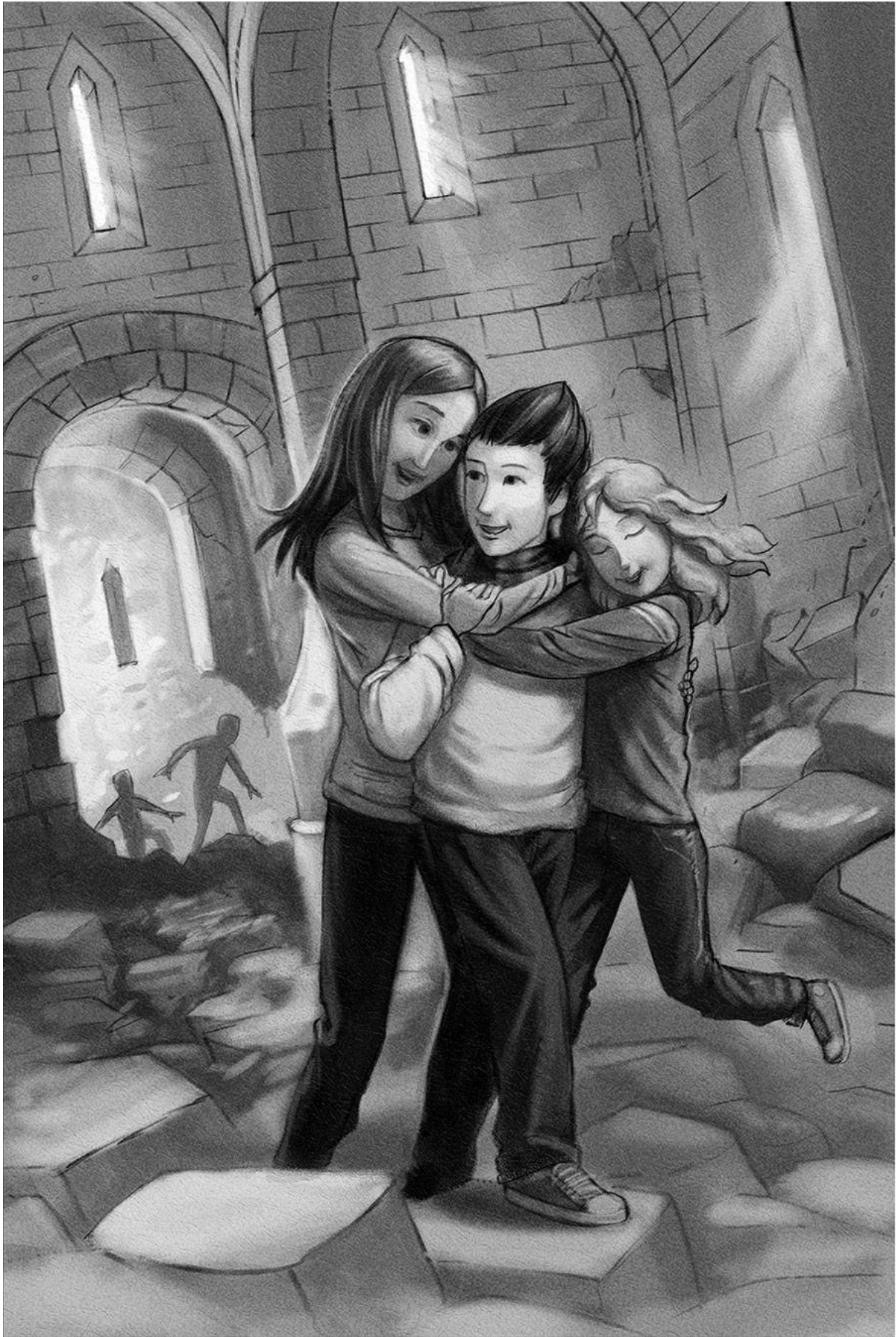
they'd just witnessed. "I could never know? You stand there and say I could never *know*? I have an actual child out there, and you're talking about things that were created only to hurt and kill others."

Lisa had never seen her mom so mad.

Unfortunately, so was Jane. Her red mask pulled back into a fierce expression. "How dare you speak about them that way! You have no inkling what you're talking about! I won't stand for this disrespect!"

Lisa knew her mom was about to do something stupid. She quickly grabbed her arm and pulled her back. "Who cares what she thinks, Mom? Let's just get out of here and—"

There were several soft thuds of something landing on the ground nearby, and Lisa heard her mom gasp. She quickly turned around. Several people had jumped down from the piles of rubble to join them, and the one standing closest sent a wave of something indescribable through Lisa's body, filling her heart and making it beat rapidly.



She and her mom ran to Tick and pulled him into a hug so tight she

might have feared for his life if they all weren't laughing and crying so hard.



Talking All at Once

Tick didn't know if he'd ever felt such a burst of pure emotion. As he hugged his mom and sister—both of them seeming to have a contest on who could squeeze him the hardest—he was crying one second then laughing the next. It was as if he'd lost his mind and all the control that went with it. But the feelings surging through his body were so strong, he didn't quite know how to handle it.

All the things he'd been through recently flashed across his mind: being taken by the Sleeks, the ordeal with the Blade of Shattered Hope, the terrible battle with Mistress Jane at the Factory, and then the short time he'd been in the Nonex, wondering if he'd ever see his family again. When they'd first been reunited in the Great Hall, he'd been too dazed to fully appreciate what it meant to be back together again. But now—especially after thinking they might have been crushed by the collapsing castle—it had hit him all at once.

Finally, reluctantly, he pulled away and took a step back. And the first thought he had when he looked at the tear-lined faces of his mom and Lisa was that they were still missing two important pieces.

"Dad," he said. "Kayla. I wish we were all together. Do you think they are okay?"

His mom nodded. "We left them at home, and I'm pretty sure Edgar wouldn't dare venture out with all the problems going on. They've got plenty of food, and the house wasn't hurt in the earthquakes."

"We need to hurry and get back to them," Tick said. "Make sure they're okay and let them know we're all safe."

His mom simply nodded and smiled, fresh tears squeezing out of her eyes.

Lisa reached out and patted him on the shoulder. "Good thing you had such an awesome big sister all those years, huh? Or you'd probably still be bawling your eyes out somewhere, too chicken to save the universe."

"Yeah, something like that." Tick rolled his eyes, then remembered with embarrassment that there were people standing around gawking at them. Master George, Mothball, Sally, Rutger, Sato, Paul, and Sofia. Mistress Jane,

her robe in terrible shape, her exposed head as bad as ever. And Mordell, who looked like she'd just drowned her own puppies in a bathtub.

George was leaning on his Barrier Wand.

"Can you wink us back to my house?" Tick asked the Realitant boss. "I could do it myself, but I'm a little spent." He smiled wearily.

His mom spoke up. "We've got our own." She stared sternly at Mordell. "What did you do with it?"

The woman shook her head.

"Lost in the rubble, I take it?" his mom responded. "Do you have any idea how long it took me to build that Wand? How much it means to me?" Her voice rose, and her face reddened.

"I'm terribly sorry," Mordell replied.

Tick felt he should ask when and where and how his own mom had created a Barrier Wand, but nothing surprised him anymore. She could tell him all about it once they were home. He decided he had the strength after all. "It's okay, Mom. I can wink us back. I've done it before, but now I know how to actually use the stuff that makes me a freak."

"Hey," Paul chimed in, "I'm the only one here allowed to call you that."

"He's not a freak," Sofia said. "You're just jealous."

Everyone started talking at once, then, as if a cork had been popped off and permission had been given to converse freely. Mothball and Rutger were next to Tick, speaking over each other to say how happy they were that everyone was safe. Tick's mom was arguing with Mordell about the lost Wand. Lisa was trying to calm their mom down. Master George and Sally were discussing their options, and Paul and Sofia wanted to butt in and have Tick to themselves, but Mothball and Rutger would have none of it. Even Sato seemed to be talking to someone, but Tick couldn't tell what was being said or *who* it was.

"Silence!"

Mistress Jane's voice boomed throughout the room, echoing back and forth unnaturally off the carved black walls as if she'd used Chi'karda to make it happen. It sliced through everyone's conversation instantly. The Great Hall fell quiet, the only sound that of the churning, rushing noises caused by the spinning mass of whatever had come out of the Fourth Dimension.

Tick stared at her, ashamed that he was too scared to disobey and curious about what she was going to say. He readied himself, pooling the Chi'karda within him in case the woman tried to do anything questionable.

"How can you all stand here like all is well in the world?" Mistress Jane asked, her mask covered by disappointment and disbelief. "Kissing and hugging and crying with joy? Making jokes and making plans for reunions?"

Am I the only one in this room who is aware of what's happening just a few hundred feet from here? Do any of you have even the slightest inkling of what's at stake?"

"We need no lectures from you," Master George said. "Nor your hypocrisy. You're the only one in this room who deliberately and maliciously tried to destroy an entire Reality—and almost destroyed all else in the process. The entire universe, according to the Haunce."

Jane waited with a condescending look of patience on her mask until Master George was finished. "Don't blame me, George. If you and your so-called Realitants hadn't interfered, my Blade would've done its job, and we'd be on our way to creating the Utopia we so desperately need. But instead, we were put on a course that led to *this*. To rips in the fabric of Reality. A breach to the Fourth Dimension. Say all you want that Atticus and the Haunce saved us, but I say that all they've done is make things worse."

Hearing that made Tick blister inside with anger. "Oh, really? What could possibly be *worse* than destroying the entire universe? Care to explain that, *Jane*?" He stressed her name, spitefully refusing to include her title.

She stared at him. "The universe would not have needed saving if you hadn't tried to stop me in your arrogance, boy. And now what we have is an entity that no one truly understands—not even the Haunce. The Void will grow and strengthen. It will spread throughout my world and then the rest of the Realities. It will inflict pain and suffering the likes of which you couldn't comprehend. Better that we had all ceased to exist at the hands of the Blade of Shattered Hope."

Now it was Tick's turn to stare back. If she was telling the truth, what did the past matter anyway? What did their terrible history with each other matter? He felt a sinking in his gut that almost made him sit on the black stone floor.

"I want everyone to listen to me," Master George said. "And I want you all to listen very carefully. There's quite a bit of anger in this room. And we stand on the ruined grounds of a castle that represents the bitterest of enemies to me and my organization."

Mistress Jane's mask shifted, suddenly and violently, to a look of outrage. But George held up a hand and, miraculously, Jane didn't say anything.

"But," the old man continued, "I'm asking each one of us to put all of that aside. Including—perhaps especially—myself. Jane, you know very well that you and I have countless reasons to despise each other. But this threat you've spoken of . . . I believe it's real, and my good associates here have gathered numerous pieces of evidence. We all knew there'd be terrible destruction as a consequence of . . . recent events. But there's something

much deeper going on. And animosity toward each other will only increase our speed along this path to eternal death.”

Tick became aware that his mouth was hanging open. It'd been awhile since he'd seen Master George like this—so formal and full of speeches—but there was so much to process in the few sentences he'd spoken that Tick's reactions couldn't keep up with it.

The old man continued. “Jane, I don't even need to ask my fellow Realitants this question, but I must ask you. Are you willing to put aside your grievances—and your personal aspirations—to work with us until we can solve this problem?”

Jane's mask had smoothed back out to a neutral expression. “You insult me with every word that comes out of your mouth, George. Implying that I could actually say no to such a request. Implying that I could be so selfish as to—”

“Answer the question!” Sato suddenly screamed. He'd been still and quiet before, but now his face burned with hatred. “It was a simple yes or no question!”

Mistress Jane slowly nodded her head, and a little smile broke out on her mask as if she wanted to wound Sato by showing that she wasn't fazed by his outburst. But when she spoke, her response was the last thing Tick had expected to hear.

“It's not *me* you should all be worried about. We're going to have a major obstacle to any plans we might have to stop this thing.”

“What are you talking about?” Master George asked.

Jane's smile vanished completely. “Reginald Chu.”



A Crossroads

Chu? What does he have to do with this Fourth Dimension problem?” Tick asked.

Mistress Jane sighed, a croak of a sound that reminded Tick of what he’d done to her throat and the rest of her body when he’d thrown the Dark Infinity substance at her in Chu’s palace. It seemed so long ago, and he never would’ve guessed that all of their lives would stay so intricately connected.

“I know him,” she said. “I know the way he thinks, and the way he lusts for power. I also know he’s a very, very smart man. I’m sure he’s back in the Fourth Reality, studying and watching and gathering data just like George has been. He’ll know about the breaches in Reality, and eventually he’ll come to the same conclusion we have made about the Fourth Dimension—that *it’s* been breached, unleashing the Void. And then there’s the final thing I know all too well about him: his arrogance. All of these together will spell our doom as surely as the mass of gray fog that churns atop my once-great home.”

“What do you mean?” Tick asked at the same time as at least three of the others. He exchanged quick glances with Paul and Sofia, both of whom looked as worried and as curious as he felt. Sato kept his angry gaze focused on Jane.

“You’ve witnessed yourself what Chu will want,” Jane said. “The power of the Void is massive, and Chu will see it as nothing but an opportunity. A chance to harness a new source of energy that could be the last piece to his puzzle that will allow him to rule us all. I won’t waste our time with defending *my* actions anymore, as noble as they are and as beyond comprehension for you as they may be, but we can all agree on Chu’s motives. He wants power, and he wants all of it. He wants to rule the rest of the Realities along with the Fourth. I find it ironic that his world is numbered the same as this . . . thing that threatens all of us. Chu will not *fear* it. He’ll embrace it until he figures out how to control its energy for his own use.”

For some reason, Tick thought back to one of his first experiences with the strangeness of his new life. The Gnat Rat that had been hidden in his closet. That creepy mechanical thing full of robotic gnats that had stung him

and sent him to the hospital. Even though Master George had sent the robot as a test for Realitant recruits, Reginald Chu had invented the device. The man had been a thorn in Tick's side ever since.

"I agree that we have many problems, indeed," Master George concluded. "Jane, I won't stand here another minute and debate morals with you. The Realitants have a job to do, and you can either work with us or against us. Make your choice."

Jane shook her head. "I most definitely do *not* have a choice, and you know it. It's *my* world where this entity has begun its massacre, and it'll be my world that gets consumed *first*. I'll work with whomever I need to in order to stop it. Not to mention the fact that you need me and my knowledge. You could have asked a little more humbly, but yes, I will help you."

"More *humbly*?" George repeated. "Your *world*? The very fact that you . . . oh, goodness gracious me. Never mind. We are all in agreement then?" He looked around the room, gathering nods from his Realitants. Tick gave his when the glance came his way.

Their leader nodded. "Good. Each one of us will put our animosities aside, our grievances, our petty wishes for revenge, and work together. Though none of us truly understand what this new threat is"—he held up a hand when Jane began to protest—"some know more about it than others. And we all know it's very, very grave. We'll begin work immediately. No rest, I'm afraid. No vacation, no relaxation. The world leaders will have to deal with the aftershocks from our . . . most recent troubles on their own." His eyes darted to Jane for the briefest of moments.

Tick could think only of his family. "Okay, then. I'll take my mom and sister back home, and then I'll meet you at the headquarters. The Grand Canyon one, I guess?"

Master George looked hesitant for some reason, fumbling with his words a bit before simply giving a quick nod of his head.

"Sounds good," Tick replied, wondering what that had been all about. "We better leave before that tornado starts making creatures again."

"First smart thing I've heard yet," Paul agreed. "Let's get out of this stink hole."

Tick turned to face his mom and sister, sweating from the thought of winking them all back home. He was pretty sure he could do it, but there was always a risk. He thought about asking Master George, but the man only had Tick's nanolocator reading, so they'd have to take the actual Wand with them when they winked. That wasn't going to work.

"Alright," he said, pushing everyone else and their problems out of his mind. "Let's hold hands while we do this."

His mom didn't budge. "Atticus, we're not going back home."

"What do you mean?"

She looked annoyed, like the answer should have been obvious. "We played a big part in bringing you back from the Nonex. Am I right or wrong on that?"

Tick knew where she was going and hated it. "Definitely right."

"I was a Realitant once. I built my own Barrier Wand. I just risked my life—and the life of my daughter—to bring you home safely. And if you think I'm going to let you out of my sight again, you're sadly mistaken. Not to mention the fact that Lisa and I are both capable of helping out. You're going to need every single body working on this that you can get."

Tick looked at her for a long time. He knew he couldn't let this happen. He couldn't. He'd never be able to focus on what needed to be done—and *not* focus on how dangerous it might be—if he had his family around. He'd be able to think only of them, saving them, protecting them. He could *not* let them stay.

"But what about Kayla? She's what matters most right now. I—we—need you to go back and make sure she and Dad are okay."

His mom folded her arms together in a defiant gesture. "Your *father* is perfectly capable of taking care of our sweet little princess. Don't insult him like that. Lisa and I are staying, and that's that."

"Mom, you—" He stopped. There was no arguing with that look in her eyes. But he also knew what needed to be done. He was racking his brain for the words to say when someone tapped him on the shoulder. He looked to see the weathered, reddened face of Master George.

"Yeah?" Tick asked.

"I, er, wondered if I might have a moment with you."

Tick wanted to leave so badly. "Can I figure this out first?"

"Only a moment," the old man interrupted. "I need just a few seconds of your time. Please." He held out a hand and raised his eyebrows. "Please." The windy, rushing sound of the Fourth Dimension cyclone was like the pulse of a rising tide on the beach.

"Okay." He gave a look to his mom and then joined Master George over by the wall farthest from the entrance to the Great Hall.

"What's going on?" Tick asked him. "I need to get them back safely before I can do anything else."

The Realitant leader's voice dropped to a whisper. "There are urgent matters at stake here, Master Atticus. Quite honestly, we don't have the time for you to go home right now. I need you, and I need you immediately."

"Just let me get them—"

“No.” His face was tight, his voice curt. Tick had never seen him so insistent. “There are times when you must remember that your power doesn’t put you in charge. Do you understand? You’ve sworn your services to the Realitants, and I’m giving you an order.”

Tick sighed, feeling lower than low. “Okay, then. Yes, sir.”

He turned away from his boss and looked squarely at his mom and sister, both of whom stared right back. Tick’s mind spun, calculating. He felt the gathering force within his chest.

“I’m really sorry, Mom,” he said.

Then he winked her and Lisa back to Reality Prime.



Diabolical Plans Again

Reginald Chu sat in a chair, looking out a window that had no glass.

The chair was inside a structure that could barely be called that—it was nothing more than a few panels of wood nailed together with a makeshift roof of plastic thrown on top. The floor was nothing but the sodden rot of an old forest floor. And the single window existed because one of the stray pieces of wood used for the hut just so happened to have a hole in it. The air was hot and steamy, seeming to rise from the moist earth as if a pool of ancient lava rested somewhere beneath the ground.

It was a far cry from the offices he had enjoyed the last time he'd been to the Fourth Reality. This had been his home, the world he had ruled singlehandedly. Until the Realitants came. Until Mistress Jane betrayed him and helped push the Higginbottom boy to the madness that had demolished his entire headquarters, which had been shaped by the most advanced technology possible into a literal mountain of glass and steel. But Chu Industries was like the great phoenix of legend. Its shell had been destroyed, but the spirit was about to rise again from the ashes.

A surprisingly low number of people had been killed that day. Many of his top executives survived. And since that fateful day when he was catapulted to the Nonex by the unfortunate meeting with his Alterant—that slimy, weakling of a science teacher—the cogs and wheels of his great empire had been turning. Planning for his return. Putting the pieces of the puzzle back into place. Watching for the first sign of his nanolocator.

And now he was back.

But he didn't want anyone besides his closest staff to know about it. Not yet. That was the reason he was in the middle of a forest, miles from the temporary location of Chu Industries, in a hut cobbled together by two idiots on the bottom of the payroll. Two idiots who had been taken care of as soon as their work was done. He relished the discomfort of the pitiful makeshift office they'd created for him. He needed the shack. It reminded him of how great his power had once been, and it motivated him to find that power once again.

There was a tapping—three hits—at the ugly slab of wood that served as his door. Reginald waited. Another three. Then two. Ten seconds passed. Five taps. Chu reached below his chair and pushed the button on the tiny device that had been taped there. The shack may have looked harmless, but if anyone tried to enter without his permission, they would've been completely incinerated by the automated lazbots hidden in the trees.

“Come in, Benson.” He knew who it was because only one person had been taught the code that had been used on the door. There was something incredibly dopey about the man, but Benson was faithful beyond anything Chu had ever witnessed. So faithful he'd almost died on several occasions.

Just as he'd been instructed, he waited until Chu repeated the command—“Come in, Benson”—before finally slipping inside the small hut of discarded wood.

“I'm ready to give you a full report,” the man said nervously, which pleased Chu. At Chu Industries, there was no room for error.

“What did you find out.” Reginald always spoke his questions as statements. They were commands for information, not requests.

“I spoke with every department head,” Benson began, his eyes cast to the floor and his hands folded before him. A servant, through and through. “In almost every way, we're back to full strength. Everything from personnel levels to supplies to research and development. Most importantly, the underground facility is only a few weeks from completion. This time your mountain will be a real one, boss.”

“Benson.”

“Yes, boss?”

“Don't ever call me 'boss' again.”

“I'm sorry, sir. I just wanted to show some respect—show who's the, um, boss.”

Reginald stood up. He figured there was time for one more lesson before the real data started pouring out. “Benson. I think you would agree with me that neither I, nor you, need any reminder whatsoever that I am your boss.”

“Yes, sir. Of course, sir.”

Chu sat back down. “Good. I won't interrupt you again. Tell me everything. Especially about the findings concerning the Fourth Dimension.”

Benson started talking, and as more time went by, the more quickly he spoke.

True to his word, Chu didn't say one thing or present one inquiry. A half hour later, he knew exactly what he needed to do and how to do it.

Within six months, Chu Industries would no longer be a company. Or an empire.

It would be Reality itself.



A Sight of Gray

We should never have let her go,” Rutger said. “Someone a lot bigger than me and a lot stronger should have stopped her.”

“Maybe someone a little less roly-poly, I’d say,” Mothball quipped.

They all stood on the hill that led to the forest, looking down in the early-morning light upon the ruins of the castle and the great, slowly churning mass of gray air that still raged in the middle of it all. Sato’s army was assembled nearby, observing as well. The invading, mysterious entity below hummed and buzzed and growled as it spun, crackling when tendrils of bright lightning shot through its surface. Tick watched in awe, knowing the thing had almost doubled in size since he last looked at it from a safe distance.

The Void of Mist and Thunder. Pure power, according to Mistress Jane. How could they rely on her information about what was happening? Well, that was an easy answer—they *couldn’t*. They needed to get back to headquarters and begin their own research.

“I’m just saying,” Rutger continued, “never in a billion years should we have trusted that woman. Not in a trillion.”

No one really argued with the butterball of a man because what he kept insisting was so obviously true. Soon after Tick had used his own hold on Chi’karda to wink away his mom and Lisa—something he’d hear about for sure in the future—Jane had used hers to wink the rest of them to this spot of temporary safety. The rumbling, machinery-like noises of the Void had grown louder and louder; the ground had begun to shake as its mass crept closer to the Great Hall. They’d needed to get away.

But then she’d gone on about how she needed to do her own part in all of this, and that she’d meet up with them soon enough, when both sides had made some progress. Master George had been furious, his usually red face growing closer to pure scarlet as he lectured her on how this problem needed all of their heads together, and then . . . she was gone. Without a word, she winked away, one second there—disheveled and scarred and exhausted—the next second, gone.

And so, a smaller group of Realitants stood in the chilly air of dawn,

watching with empty bellies as an unknown force of gray fog began devouring the universe.

Typical stuff for people like us, Tick thought. Simple job. Hopefully they'd be done in time to beat rush hour tonight and get home for an early supper.

He snickered at his own lame joke.

"Telling jokes in your head over there, sport?" Paul asked him. He stood next to Sofia, and neither one of them seemed to think anything was even remotely funny about their current situation.

"No. It wasn't that kind of laugh. It was more like the we're-definitely-going-to-die-so-why-even-bother laugh. You know."

Paul actually broke a smile, a genuine one, even. "Oh, yeah. Like in the movies. The bad guy always giggles before he gets pushed out a plane or something. Or right as the axe starts swinging down."

"Uh . . . yeah," Tick said with a sarcastic nod. "Something like that."

"Rutger's right," Sato cut in, curt and abrupt. "Every single one of us was stupid to let Jane leave. We should've shackled her to a tree—something. Now we have three enemies to worry about—Jane, Chu, and that . . . thing down there."

Master George sighed, looking about as weary as Tick had ever seen him. "Sato. Rutger. My good men. I understand your concern, but I assure you, there's no way we could have stopped her. Like Master Atticus, she has herself become a Barrier Wand and has power beyond what we even think. I believe there was honor in her once, and I know she couldn't possibly want the end of her own world—as she puts it—to come about. We'll have to trust that she is off doing something that will truly help the cause."

Sally suddenly spoke up. He'd been so quiet, it seemed as if he wasn't even around, despite his huge stature and ridiculous clothes. "I trust that snicker doodle of a woman 'bout as much as a hen can toss a rooster barn. Cain't believe she was ever one a-yorn, ole George. Just cain't believe it nohow."

"She was," their leader said through another heavy sigh. "She most definitely was. And, sadly, one of the best we ever had. Who knows what might have been if she hadn't been assigned to the Thirteenth Reality? Power corrupted her like mold condemns a building. Slowly, but certainly. As it grew inside of her."

"So?" Sofia asked. "What do we do now? What's first?"

Master George pulled in a deep breath, sticking his chest way out and adjusting his filthy suit. "Some of us are going back to the Grand Canyon in Prime. We need to put our thoughts together and make sure we understand

everything we can. We need to *understand* before we can do anything to stop this madness.”

“Some of us?” Tick asked. “Who *isn't* going, and what are they doing instead?”

George gave a tired look to Sato, and Tick knew he was about to ask his friend to do something dangerous. “Sato, my good man. I want you and your army to stay here. I need you to research this business about the creatures of Mistress Jane being transformed by the Void somehow. I believe there may be something extremely important to learn there. We also need someone close by to observe this . . . monstrosity and report back regularly on its progress.”

Tick expected to see a flash of disappointment in Sato’s features—he was missing out on a chance to go back to safety, shower and eat, rest up—but instead, he stood a little straighter and gave a stiff nod.

“Okay,” he said simply. “That’s what the Fifth and I will do, then.”

Tick was filled with an unexpected sadness. They’d all *just been* reunited. He walked over to Sato and held out a hand, fighting to make sure he didn’t let a stray tear leak out somehow.

Sato took his hand and shook it, squeezing it hard. “Glad to have you back, Tick.”

“Yeah. Good to be back. Glad to see you alive. I know you saved a lot of kids that day at the Factory.”

Sato’s hand dropped to his side; Tick felt the blood rush back in his own. “We had to leave a few behind.”

Tick didn’t know what to say to that.

“But . . . it’s good we could save the ones we did,” Sato added. He looked at Master George knowingly, as if they’d had a conversation about it countless times.

“Yeah,” Tick responded lamely. “Well, looks like there’s gonna be a lot more to save. You think we’re up for it?”

Sato smiled, something so rare that Tick almost took a step backward. “My Fifth Army will save so many people that the Realities will get sick of us. Jealous they couldn’t have done it themselves.”

Tick forced out a laugh. “I doubt that. Well, good luck, man. I’m sure we’ll all be back together soon enough, fighting this Void thing somehow. Sound good?”

“Yeah. Sounds good.”

Tick was pretty sure he’d just had the lamest conversation of his life, but he hoped that Sato knew how he felt in his heart. The others came over and said their good-byes, including a very long one between Mothball and her parents that included some very disturbing wailing along with the tears.

When everyone was done, Tick gathered with Master George, Sally, Mothball, Rutger, Paul, and Sofia. The Realitants. They used George's Wand this time, winking away from the cyclone of the hungry Void from the Fourth Dimension.

Tick knew they'd be back.

Part 3



The Blue River



A Nap on the Couch

Mistress Jane was beyond exhausted. She felt a deep, aching weariness like nothing she'd ever felt before in her life. Her arms, her legs, her chest, her bones, her nerves, her veins. Her brain and head and skull. She was just so tired. And it seemed as if every last souliken she'd ever owned had drained out of her over the last couple of days. She needed rest. Desperately. Food and sleep.

Which was exactly why she couldn't handle another single minute with those buffoons who called themselves Realitants. She'd fed them what they wanted to hear about helping them against the Void and Chu, but she had her own ulterior motives. If it weren't for Atticus Higginbottom, the Realitants would have absolutely no reason to even stay on her radar. But that insolent boy changed so many things. Everything.

She was in a place no one would have ever guessed. In an apartment—an ordinary, drab, dusty old thing that hadn't been lived in for years—located in the middle of New York City, Reality Prime. It had been the first place she'd ever rented on her own, and where she'd fallen in love so long ago. Where she'd completed her studies and first dared wink herself to other realities with the Barrier Wand she'd made with her own hands. It was here, sitting on this same frumpy couch, where she'd first had the thought that the Thirteenth Reality might change her life and, eventually, all of Reality itself.

The place had been rented and paid for ever since. Cleaned every so often by a maid. Jane couldn't bear to get rid of it, not after all the memories born within its humble walls. And, with her castle destroyed, her body depleted, and her future in doubt, she didn't know where else to go except to this place that had once been home.

She lay back on the couch, pulling her tattered robe around her body like a blanket. As horrible as she felt, being here brought her the smallest bit of comfort.

Her life was at a crossroads. The plan she'd had to essentially destroy and rebuild the Realities from the ground up had been foiled. She'd accepted that. Perhaps it was a little easier to take since immediately afterward, there'd

been the threat of spending the rest of eternity in that awful, awful Nonex. Making it back safely had been a breath of fresh air that took the stink off the failure that had led to it.

But life could be so ironic sometimes. Now there was something beyond her control that threatened to annihilate the Realities. If the Void succeeded, that may be that. Destruction with no hope of rebuilding. Although, deep down, she didn't believe it. There was always a solution. Always a way. *Everything* was an opportunity. She and Chu had made a bargain in the Nonex. A plan to see both of their destinies fulfilled. The breach of the Fourth Dimension had at first seemed to put that plan on hold, but now she wasn't so sure. Not so sure at all.

Beneath her mask, she smiled. All she needed was a little rest. The growth of the Void would take some time. She could use a couple days of eating and relaxing and healing.

A couple of days of scheming.

Mistress Jane fell asleep.



Tick waited in the conference room; he was the first one to get there. Master George had said they could take exactly thirty minutes to shower, rest, and gather their wits. Rutger was supposed to be putting together a meal for them all—something Tick couldn't wait to get his hands on. That little guy could *cook*. Tick's stomach rumbled and bounced and gurgled, desperate for anything. Even a slice of boiled cabbage sounded good right then.

He was still worried about his mom. And Lisa. And Kayla. And Dad. He should've ignored George's curt command and gone home really quickly to make sure everything was okay. But then again, maybe not. If he was going to be a Realitant, then he needed to act like one. He'd have to trust that they'd—

He stopped. Suddenly and absolutely, he felt like he'd made the biggest mistake in the world. This was his *family* they were talking about. His family. How silly that he couldn't just wink back to Deer Park really fast, check on everybody, then make it back here. How could his peace of mind and the safety of the four most important people in the universe—to him, anyway—be relegated to the bottom of the stack? In fact, it made him mad. How could Master George expect that of him?

Tick stood up and looked at the door. No one was even there yet. He was supposed to sit and wonder about his own family while everyone else took their time primping and relaxing. The last hour or so suddenly seemed absurd to him. He'd sent off his mom without asking her! Sent away his sister! All so Master George could rest assured that his number one weapon was close by and ready for service.

Forget that.

Tick closed his eyes, focusing and pooling his power. Then he winked himself to the woods that ran along the road to Deer Park. He winked himself home.



Rutger huffed and puffed as he carried the stacks of plates down the hallway. Why Master George didn't buy him some kind of rolling tray to make this easier was beyond him. Of all the Realitants to be carrying heavy plates full of hot and scrumptious food down the length of hall between the kitchen and the conference room, he was the *least* qualified. But every time he pointed that out to the boss, the old man just said it'd probably be awhile before another event, and that next time, he'd help Rutger personally.

Of course, that never happened. The buzzard always had something more urgent to attend to until the very second. By then, Rutger was all done. Even his best friend, Mothball, would magically disappear when the time came to transport the food. And what food it was.

Savory thrice-baked potatoes. Succulent steak with mushroom sauce. Crisp, bright green asparagus soaked in butter and lemon juice. Freshly baked rolls with honey butter. He expected to hear many, many, many compliments after the meal. The anticipation almost made him forget that the entire universe was on the cusp of being devoured by a giant gray fog. Well, it wouldn't happen *today*, at any rate.

Paul and Sofia were there when he brought in the first round. They offered to help, but he declined, suddenly liking the idea that he did it all himself. Sally was there the next time. Then Master George. Mothball popped in after he'd brought in the last of the meal, giving him an "Oh, would ya need some 'elp there, little man?" He just gave her a knowing look and continued about his business, making sure everything looked nice and pretty on the table. Steam rose to the ceiling, and the smells made his considerable belly ache to be fed.

When all was set, he rubbed his hands together, feeling very satisfied indeed.

"Well," he said, "looks like we're ready to partake. All we need is Tick."

"Forget that," Paul said. "He must've gone outside or something—he left the dorms way before I did. And I didn't see him anywhere. Let's dig in!"

"Absolutely not!" Rutger roared. "After all he's done for us? I won't hear of it. We'll wait until he gets here."

Paul grumbled something unintelligible and put his chin in his hands, staring longingly at the delicious, mouthwatering food—in Rutger's humble opinion, of course.

Master George slowly stood up, then leaned forward and put his hands on the table, a grave look on his face. “Goodness gracious me,” he whispered. “I know exactly what’s happened.”

“What?” Rutger asked, hearing the whine in his own voice. He didn’t want anything to ruin this fine meal.

Their leader closed his eyes for a moment before opening them again. “I believe we have a rogue Realitant. Tick has run away, against my orders. And at such a time as this.” He puffed out his chest, his face sunken in disappointment. “I guess I can understand his decision, but I certainly hope it doesn’t come back to haunt us.”



A Nice Morning Stroll

Sato couldn't remember the last time he'd had a full night's rest. And what a strange time to do it.

After the other Realitants had winked away, he'd led his army—now only a few dozen strong—in a full march around the perimeter of the ruins of Mistress Jane's castle. He didn't really know what he was looking for or wanted to find, but they'd searched all the same. And saw nothing unusual—except for the ever-present, massive gray cloud of mist and lightning that spun in the middle of the ruins, growling as it got bigger and bigger. Sato guessed by the end of the next day that it would cover every last inch of fallen stone.

It had grown dark by the end of their long walk, and he'd given his soldiers the entire evening to get some sleep. Tollaseat had seemed the most appreciative, though he never would've admitted it. But the way he collapsed on the ground and started snoozing said it all.

Now it was early morning, and the world was full of that purple, chill air that comes right before the sun begins to show its light. Sato had slept soundly and peacefully, and when he woke up, he'd felt refreshed and filled with strength. As he sat and stared out at the distant horizon, determined to catch the moment when the sun *did* pop over the edge, he thought about what Master George had said. The old man thought there was something to the fact that all the creatures of Mistress Jane had disappeared somewhere, then reappeared in some altered state out of the Void.

Sato hadn't thought much about it at the time, but there *was* something weird about it. When he'd first caught sight of the castle, hordes of fangen and other nasty creatures had been crawling all over the surface of the structure and its grounds. And Sato had also seen some of them fleeing when the weird breach in Reality had first split the air. But there should've been more creatures. Many, many more. Where had they all gone? And why weren't their bodies strewn all over the place if they'd been killed? There'd been some bodies inside the passageway by the stream, but none anywhere else. Had they been . . . cloned? Transformed? What?

The more Sato thought about it, the stranger it seemed. Well, it was his job to find out the truth, and he meant to do it. He was glad to have a specific task to keep himself occupied.

He stood up and stretched, allowing a big, loud yawn to escape that sounded like a demented ghost.

“Get your bones all nice and rested, you did, I ’spect?”

Sato turned to see Tollaseat, who was stretching and yawning himself. “Slept great, actually. I’ve been thinking a lot about what we’re supposed to be doing for Master George. About the creatures and how they all disappeared.”

“Been thinkin’ myself, I ’ave,” the giant man said. “Remembered you tellin’ us all about how them nasty little buggers were runnin’ toward the middle of the castle when the mess started and all. Well, mayhaps we should be lookin’ there? Only checked the roundabout yesterday night, we did.”

Tollaseat was right. Yes, they’d walked around the entire ruins of the castle, but Tick had told everyone that the fangen and all their ugly cousins had been screaming and sprinting deeper *into* the building. Why would they have done that with the whole thing about to come down?

“You might be on to something,” Sato said. “Why don’t you and I go take a look before everyone else wakes up?”

“Could use a nice mornin’ stroll, I could.”

The two of them set off again for the destroyed home of Mistress Jane. Sato tried to ignore the huge, churning cloud of gray fog and lightning in the middle of it, but that was one task that proved impossible.



Tick stepped out of the woods near his home just as the sun tipped over the horizon and spilled bright morning light across the old, cracked road that he’d walked down a million times before. He was still disturbed by the long swath of broken, mangled trees he’d seen in the forest. They were leftover from the time he’d let loose his powers without even realizing it. Dissolving and reconstructing mass in his panic. He’d wanted to forget those episodes, but maybe it was a good reminder that he had a vast amount of power inside him. He needed to make sure he kept learning how to control it.

As he set off down the road toward his neighborhood, he started feeling the inevitable guilt. Master George had been very stern in ordering him to return to headquarters with the other Realitants and to save this reunion for another time. But it made Tick mad. His family was the most important thing to him right now, and he needed to make sure they were safe. He’d tried to wink directly to his house, but the pull of the deep Chi’karda pool in the forest had brought him there instead—exactly where he’d first seen Mothball

disappear so long ago. It felt like a lifetime ago.

So this wouldn't quite be as quick of a trip as he'd hoped. He imagined his leader and his friends sitting in the conference room, waxing on about what a poor example Tick had shown. What a bad Realitant he was. How selfish he was. But a few hours wouldn't matter. Plus, he was pretty sure Paul and Sofia would defend him no matter what.

Tick suddenly filled up with cheer at the thought of seeing his family again. He broke into a run down the long, straight road.



Reginald Chu was scanning through a few more of the data reports Benson had wired to his reading tablet when there was an abrupt pounding on the wooden slab he called a door in his makeshift office. He almost dropped the device from the shock of the interruption, and half of him was angry, the other half relieved no one had seen his embarrassing reaction.

It took him another second to realize that the number of knocks—as hard and frantic as they were—matched the first part of his secret code. After a pause, the knocks started again. Chu quickly reached down and deactivated the lazbots.

“Oh, come on in, already!” he shouted.

Benson slipped through the door, looking as nervous as ever; trickles of sweat ran down both sides of his face.

“What, pray tell, could be so urgent?” Chu asked sternly.

“The boy. Atticus. For some reason, he left the Realitant headquarters and is all alone. I know it's earlier than you expected, sir, but this is too golden of an opportunity. We have him tracked and know exactly where he is! With no one around him to fight off!”

Chu stood up. “Amazing—what a fool that kid can be. But let's not forget, he doesn't really need an army with all that Chi'karda boiling inside his body. We'll have to tread carefully.”

“He's heading toward his house, sir. He might be alone for only a few more minutes.”

“Oh, please,” Chu said with a laugh. “It'll be even easier if he's surrounded by his family. He'll be . . . more distracted.”

“Whatever you say, boss. I mean, sir.”

Chu hardly noticed the slip. “But maybe haste is best. Ready the Bagger. We leave immediately.”



A Tense Conversation

The conference room had been silent for at least five minutes.

Paul kept fidgeting in his seat, worried about Tick and wishing he hadn't left. All his friend wanted to do was check on his family—they all did. How could anyone blame him? Just because Tick was a freak and could actually travel on his own without a Barrier Wand didn't make him a monster. If Paul could do that fancy trick, he'd be on a beach in the Bahamas sipping lemonade and waiting for the world to end.

Oh, forget this, he thought. Time to speak up.

"Hey, Tick will be back soon. Quit looking so sad." Everyone in the room was staring at the table or the floor like hypnotized zombies. Sofia seemed distraught, and Mothball looked even more sullen than usual. Rutger was eating, the little stinker, but that was probably just how he dealt with things.

"You don't understand, Master Paul," George said. "I could see the rebellion in your friend's eyes, and I knew he was tempted to do things that he wasn't even thinking about yet except on a subconscious level. I knew he'd see his family, remember the horrors he's been through, and begin to think selfish thoughts. Feel tempted to stay with them, run away, keep them safe. How can we have our Realitants run off willy-nilly when we need them the most? He shouldn't have gone. I'm terribly sorry to say it."

Paul understood but didn't want to admit it. "How can you blame him for winking away really quick just to check on his family? I'm sure he'll be back any second. You're making too much of it!"

George slammed his hand down on the table. "I will not have you speak to me this way! I am your leader and I demand respect! We're on the cusp of something that could kill every single living person in every Reality! Each of us have higher callings than running off to check on mums and dads!"

He stopped, and the entire room fell dead silent. Even Rutger had frozen with a piece of steak halfway to his mouth. Paul's anger had vanished, replaced by pure shock. He'd never seen *this* before.

"I know I sound harsh," George finally said in a much calmer voice, "but

I feel as if our organization has slowly gone down the pits, so to say, since Jane embraced her evil ways and Lorena Higginbottom decided to leave our ranks. We used to be disciplined and strong and willing to sacrifice all for the greater good. But now I can't even convince any of our members to leave their homes and come to help us. We've fallen apart, I swear it."

The old man suddenly slumped down in his chair and buried his head in his hands. Paul half-expected him to sob, but he just sat there, perfectly quiet and still, for a long minute. Then he looked up, and his face was as determined as Paul had ever seen it.

"Never mind all that," George said. "We have a job to do, and I expect us to do it. If I have to go it alone, I will. And if . . . *when* I defeat the Void of the Fourth Dimension, I'll build the Realitants from the ground up. I stake my life on this promise to all of you."

Paul blinked, not sure what to say.

"Ya won't be alone s'long as *my* heart's still tickin', you won't," Mothball said. "I'll be by your side to the bitter end, warts and all."

"Me too," Rutger added. Then he finally finished off his bite of juicy steak.

Sally wasn't about to be upstaged. "Ya'll ain't havin' all da fun, I can promise you *that*."

"Paul and I—we're in too." Sofia said. She shot Paul a look that said he better shape up. But something in her eyes let him know that she understood his frustrations about George's reaction to Tick leaving.

Paul groaned. "You guys know very well that I'm not quitting. But after all that Tick has done, I think it's really lame to just snap your fingers and accuse him of being a traitor. It's about the most unfair thing I've ever heard."

"It wasn't a snap of my fingers," George said sadly. "Master Atticus chose to go against my direct order. If my words were harsh, I apologize. But I don't want someone by my side in the very last battle of these worlds who might turn his back on me."

"Tick would never do that," Paul said in a low growl. "You know it. He just went for a quick trip to check on his *family*."

"Sorry to be the one to point this out," Rutger said, "but he hasn't come back yet, now has he?" His eyes darted around the room as though worried he'd said something wrong. "But no one likes the boy more than me. I hope you'll be a little forgiving, Master George."

The leader of the Realitants nodded slowly. "We will deal with him how we must, I assure you. However, I already have a very bad feeling that we may not see him for a while. A very bad feeling indeed."



Tick's heart lifted when he passed a clump of trees close to the road and saw the turn into his neighborhood come into view. He'd been lightly jogging and now picked up his pace to a full sprint, eager to run up the steps of his porch and rip the door open. He knew everyone would be there. Safe and sound and happy. He knew it. He was completely ignoring the small part of him that worried something horrible had happened. That they *wouldn't* be there. Or worse.

This was why he had come. He needed to know for sure. Master George was probably ranting and raving by now, but he'd deal with that when he got back. Soon. He was just about to reach the street, less than thirty feet away, when he heard a loud noise from somewhere above him.

It was a bang, instant and piercing, like the clang of two giant iron pots. Times a thousand. Tick was so startled that he cried out and fell to the ground, rolling off the road and down the slight decline. He came to a stop in the dirt, on his back, looking up to search for what could have possibly been the source of such an awful sound. He saw a blur of flashing light and something silvery and long above him, accompanied by a great whooshing sound, like the thrust of rockets. Wind tore through the air and ripped at his clothes, sending dust and pebbles scattering down the slope.

Holding up his forearm to shield his eyes, his vision finally cleared enough to see the thing that had suddenly appeared in the sky over his head. It was a thick rectangle of silver metal, roughly the size and shape of a coffin. Its surface was smooth, without any seams, and the lights that flashed around it made no sense to Tick, as if they were being created by invisible protrusions from the flying object. Whatever it was, the push of air from the silver coffin was like a hurricane blast, growing stronger as it hovered in the air.

Then it slowly descended toward Tick.

He flopped onto his stomach, got his hands beneath him, and pushed up to jump to his feet. He slipped and slid as his arms windmilled, fighting to gain his balance on the small hill. He'd just gained solid purchase when there was a clicking sound right behind his ears. The noise sent a burst of terror through him, though he didn't understand why, and he burst into a sprint, not even taking a chance to look back.

He'd only gone a few yards when a thin cable of something strong slipped around his stomach, coiled tight, and ripped his body up into the air.



A Rebound of Power

Tick's initial shout turned into a strangled grunt as the cord pinched into his stomach and he vaulted away from the ground. His body doubled over as he grabbed the ridged metal of the thing that had captured him—it felt like a wire on an old telephone pole. He twisted and kicked with his feet and tried to pull the thing loose, to no avail. He continued to rise, the sight of the road replaced by the tops of trees, all of it making his head spin and his stomach flip. Giving up on the cord, he tried to turn so he could see what held him.

The blocky silver rectangle was pulling him along, the metal cord coming out of a hole just big enough for it to fit. There was a moment where everything seemed to freeze, and Tick searched his mind for a possible explanation of what was happening. If anyone was watching from below, what else could they think except that a UFO had zapped down from outer space to steal the first human they could find in order to perform experiments? It was all just so . . . odd. Tick was surprised at how little terror he felt now—much less than when he'd first heard that clicking sound.

Because he remembered that he had an untapped amount of power inside his body.

He closed his eyes and let the Chi'karda flow into his chest, into his heart and nerves and bones and muscles. The surge of it was like a rushing river, somehow cold and hot at the same time, filling him with a rapturous clarity and a sense of being unstoppable. Like he could crush mountains or drink up the entire ocean and spit it back out. He wanted to roar and pound his chest. When he opened his eyes again, the familiar orange mist spun around him and clung to his skin, particles of light bouncing along his clothes, untouched by the wind.

With both hands, he grabbed the trailing length of the cord that connected his waist to the boxy contraption that flew through the air. He wrenched his body around until he'd twisted enough that he faced the long cube of silver. After pulling in a deep breath, he blew out the power that had boiled and churned inside of him, letting it flow like an open faucet, throwing every ounce of power at the box that had captured him. A great rushing sound filled

his ears, and the world blinded him with orange light.

A thunderclap shook the air, along with a massive jolt of power.

Tick was suddenly plummeting, his hearing deafened, his senses completely out of whack. It was like he'd been flooded with numbing drugs. On some level, he felt the tops of trees scratching his back, felt the cord still cinched tightly around his waist, but his vision had gone from orange to bright white, and he could hear absolutely nothing. The pulse of his blood was a pounding in his head, a thump-thump-thump that he could only feel, a vibration that rattled down his spine.

He was still being pulled along. Somehow he knew that. The branches weren't suddenly gone—nothing tore at his clothes or bit at his skin. His eyes darted wildly, trying to see anything but the whiteness that seared his sight. The calmness and sense of invincibility from earlier completely vanished, replaced by a fiery panic that lit up his nerves. What was happening to him? He couldn't see, couldn't hear. He barely felt the motion of flying through the air or the metal rope wrapped around his middle. How could all that power he'd thrown at the long, silvery coffin not have freed him and dropped him to the forest floor?

He didn't know what else to do but try again. Though weakened from whatever had happened the first time, he concentrated on his internal self, pooling the Chi'karda once again. It came as only a trickle, a weak stream of power that barely made a splash compared to what it had been before. It had no form or substance. It couldn't take shape. It wasn't strong enough for him to do anything with it. And he still couldn't see.

His panic erupted into anger. Rage tore through his body and weakened some of the dam holding back the Chi'karda. He screamed and tried again, pulling on whatever lever he sensed that controlled the link between him and the Realities. The surge came, rushed through him like a flood, filling him with relief as strong as the power itself.

Still flying through the air, still attached to the cord, he didn't wait, didn't allow himself even a second to enjoy the swell of pleasure. He threw everything he had at the object holding him captive.

This time he didn't hear the thunderclap at all, just felt it. A thump of violence that jarred his bones and rattled his skull. The blinding light around him brightened even more, intense with heat and pressure. The rope around his waist jerked forward, pulling his body along with it. A sprinkle of pain cut through the numbness, making him reach for his back. But his fingers were numb too, and he felt nothing there. All was blunt and dull and lifeless. Nothing made sense anymore. His brain began to shut down.

His hearing came back just long enough for him to hear that clicking sound again. Then everything exploded in a rush of movement, and darkness

engulfed him.



Chu needed a break from his run-down excuse for a temporary office. Maybe a permanent break. He hated the little place, and he missed the power of being in charge, of being *seen* as the man in charge.

Reginald Chu stood in the newly built laboratory, leaning against the railing as he stared down at the massive chamber. It was seven or eight football fields wide and at least three tall. Big. Really, really big. Even larger than the chamber inside the mountain palace, which Atticus Higginbottom had brought crumbling down right before Chu was sent to the Nonex. Tick. The little rat.

But Chu's people had already been working on this new facility and had even picked up the pace, hoping that someday their leader would return. They were loyal and smart. Benson led the security details, but the real geniuses were Chu's engineers and scientists and physicists. He'd gathered more brain power into one place over the last thirty years than anywhere else in all the Realities. His men shared his goals. Most of them didn't care what the end result might be—let Chu rule the world, other worlds, whatever—as long as they kept getting the funds they needed to do the research that kept their old hearts ticking.

And now they'd built the largest research facility in history. This chamber was only a small part of it. It went on and on and on. And the most amazing thing about it was that the complex had been built entirely underground. It was simply awesome.

And it was time for Chu to finally move back in. He'd had his moments of reflection and his moments of appreciating what had been taken from him. But things were going to move, and move fast, now. Below him, his workers were finalizing the very device he planned to use to harness the immense power of the Void that had escaped the Fourth Dimension.

Right on cue, his earpiece buzzed. It was Benson.

“We got him, sir. The Bagger worked like a charm.”

“Excellent,” Chu replied. “Let Mistress Jane know at once.”



A Pulsing Light

Sato picked his way along the top of the rubble, knowing that he could slip to his death at any second. The ruined stone and brick and wood and whatever else Jane had used to build the place lay stacked on top of each other like some kind of fragile toy, ready to collapse at any second. Something shifted with every step, and Sato kept thinking he couldn't possibly feel his heart leap any stronger, but it seemed to do so every time.

The gray mass of spinning air was only a few hundred feet to his left, and that certainly wasn't helping his nerves. Cracks of thunder shook the air and made the debris beneath his feet tremble, and as hard as he tried, he couldn't stop himself from looking over every few seconds at the brilliant displays of lightning. The Void itself was downright creepy. It had a steady roar and a chilling movement to it that made Sato feel as if it were alive and hungry.

And it was growing steadily. Half of the castle ruins had been swallowed by the entity, and its pace of expansion seemed to be increasing. If they were going to learn anything about what had happened to Mistress Jane's creatures, they'd need to figure it out fast.

Tollaseat tapped him on the shoulder, making him almost jump out of his skin. "What if that blimey thing decides it wants to take a bit of leapin' at us?" Mothball's dad asked. "Takes a fancy at throwin' a lightning bolt or two our way?"

"Then duck," Sato replied. "You're welcome to go back if you want."

Tollaseat laughed, a booming sound that drowned out the thunder and rush of wind for a few seconds. "You make a grouchy grump, you do. Or is it a grumpy grouch?"

"Just keep looking." Sato had enjoyed the tiny reprieve from the noises of the Void, but knew he couldn't admit it. He needed to keep his game face on now. Be a leader. "You go that way, and I'll go this way. But not too far off. We need to be off this big pile of rocks in an hour."

"Can't come soon enough," the man mumbled.

Sato turned his back to him once more and started gingerly walking over the rubble again. According to their best guess, they were currently over the

section the fangen and other creatures had been running toward, but everything looked the same from the outside—broken and dusty. Keeping his arms out for balance, he walked across the crooked stacks of stones, looking through the gaps and cracks for any sign of . . . he didn't know. Something.

A few minutes later, he spotted it. Far down below the debris, just visible through the layers of stone, he saw a glowing blue light that pulsed every two or three seconds, flashing more brilliantly before fading again to a dull glow.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Come over here and look!"

Tollaseat's face lit up with excitement, and he started lumbering his way over to where Sato stood. The man was so much taller and bigger than an average man, and Sato feared he'd crash down in a cloud of dust and rock chips at any second. But he finally made it and raised his shoulders in question.

"Down there." Sato pointed.

Tollaseat put a big hand on Sato's shoulder and leaned in to take a look. Sato flexed his leg muscles to keep his knees from collapsing under the added weight.

"Well, I'll be," the man said, the glow from below reflecting in his large eyes. "Take me spine out and tickle 'er up and down! What in the blazes you reckon that is, sir?"

Sato looked at his friend and best soldier. "I don't know. But this can't be a coincidence. Those nasty things of Jane's were running this way, and then they all seemed to vanish, only to reappear later. And now there's a flashing blue light shining in a place that doesn't use electricity."

"Right, you are. Can't be two toads bumpin' tongues on the same fly, that's for sure."

"Huh?" When Tollaseat opened his mouth to answer, Sato cut him off. "Never mind. Let's get down to that thing. Time's running out."

He planted his feet as firmly as he could then bent over to lift a piece of rock directly above the odd blue glow. He chucked it to the side, the crack of it hitting the rubble barely audible over the noises of the Void.

In the shadow of the huge gray funnel of mist filled with lightning and thunder, Sato and Tollaseat started digging through the ruins of Mistress Jane's castle.



Paul was curled up in his bed—or the bed he'd been given at the Grand Canyon headquarters—staring at the wall. He'd never felt so low in all his life, and there'd been some freaky, scary moments over the last couple of years. But right that second, he just wanted to sink into the mattress, fall

asleep, and never wake up again. Everything had gone so wrong.

How could the whole world—scratch that, the whole *universe* and every single Reality within it—be in so much trouble? *Again?* Mistress Jane and her fancy schmancy Blade of Shattered Hope had almost set off a chain reaction that would've destroyed the universe. Paul didn't care about the specifics, but he knew that Tick had saved them all. Yeah, he'd been sucked away into the Nonex, but deep down, Paul had known the kid was okay and that he'd find his way back somehow. Or, at least, Paul had told himself that.

But now all this? Some big gray cloud called the Void from the Fourth Dimension was eating away at a planet? And then Jane said it would keep on going once that was all done. And then Tick had to make it worse by running off against Master George's wishes. Which wasn't so bad to Paul—what was *bad* was the fact that Tick hadn't come *back*. And Rutger couldn't get a lock on Tick's nanolocator. The Realitant system kept saying that it was blocked, a thing that had obviously bewildered and bamboozled everyone listening.

Not Paul. To him, the news had just made him sick to his stomach. He'd insisted on leaving, going to his room. *Sorry, so sorry, but I don't feel so well.* Which was the absolute truth. They were supposed to take care of Chu and Mistress Jane then have fun exploring other worlds for the rest of their lives. It wasn't supposed to be like this. Paul wanted to shout at the top of his lungs. Maybe pound on some walls while he was at it.

He sat up.

He had to do something. Master George and the others had talked and talked around the conference room table and had come up with absolutely nothing to show for it. Except that they were going to keep researching, keep tabs on things, blah blah blah. Paul couldn't stand the thought of all that wasted time and energy. A big glob of *fog* was eating away at Reality, and his best friend had gone missing.

He had to do something, and he had to do something now, or he'd go completely nutso bat-crazy. Ignoring the ache and nausea in his belly, he slid off the bed and opened his door, stepping out into the hallway. It was right then that an image of a box popped into his head. A little metal box with a green button. And Paul knew exactly where Master George had placed it.

He started walking in that direction.



Ill Reunion

When Tick opened his eyes, the face of Reginald Chu was staring back down at him. It was a face that had once meant so much to him—this terrible man was the Alterant of Tick’s beloved science teacher, one of the greatest people ever. It was crazy how two opposites could look so much alike.

Tick was surprised at how little panic he felt. The ordeal that had happened near his home had been terrible. The movement and disorientation from whatever it was that had captured him had caused him to faint. He’d eventually awakened on a gurney of steel in some kind of bright washroom, reeking. He almost gagged from his own smell. He’d barely been conscious enough to have the thought, however, before someone pricked him with something that made him doze off again. His last memory was of a big hose washing him off before the darkness took him away.

And now, here he was again. Waking up. He could feel clean, fresh clothes on his skin. He could see lights in the ceiling. And the ugly, smug face of Chu peering down at him as if he were nothing but an insect specimen.

“Don’t even think about reaching for your Chi’karda,” the man said. “Before I say anything else, I’ll warn you on that front. Do you understand?”

Tick stared at him but said nothing. His mind went back to his failed attempts to escape from that weird silver coffin that had captured him. Twice he’d tried to destroy the object and free himself by throwing out his power, only to have it rebound and practically fry his brain. He still didn’t really understand the whole strange turn of events.

Chu continued. “I can see the light of understanding in your eyes. I’m sure you remember when you and Jane came to Chu Industries, invited by yours truly. I wanted the best for my Dark Infinity project, and I knew there had to be something in place to block your Chi’karda levels. Well, obviously it didn’t work then—now did it? You destroyed my entire building and ruined Jane’s body for life.”

“Maybe I’ll do it again,” Tick responded. His confidence was returning, and he still felt no real fear, despite the situation.

“You’re missing my point. Once again your arrogance is preventing your

brain from processing my words. I'm reminding you of the measures I had in place because they have been improved upon. My people are very clever, and you would be wise not to try anything. You felt what happened when you tried to use your force against the Bagger."

"The Bagger?" Tick repeated. He lifted his head up and saw that he was lying on a small bed with several metal cords wrapped around his body, holding him down. The cords were much thinner than the one that had sprung from the long silver box and grabbed him by the waist, but seemed to be made from the same material.

"It's an invention of Chu Industries that I have neither the time or the desire to explain. It uses technology that lies beyond terminology you would understand anyway. But the key is that it was armed with my anti-Chi'karda recoil mechanism. And it worked. Sorry to test it on you—I'm sure you don't appreciate being the guinea pig, considering you could have died. What a pity that would've been."

This supposedly grown man was acting like a child, and it annoyed Tick to no end. "Maybe you can just *tell me why I'm here.*"

Chu's head pulled back ever so slightly, as if he were surprised that Tick would take such a tone considering his obvious disadvantages. "Don't mistake bravery for stupidity, boy. With all the people I've crushed or pushed aside in my lifetime quest to rule the Realities and make them better, it should be clear that I have many, many enemies. But no one comes close to being a target of my sheer . . . animosity as you do. Mr. Higginbottom, I despise you—there's no other way to put it. And your margin of error with me is as thin as a red blood cell. Do you understand?"

"*You despise me?*" Tick asked, incredulous. "How do you think I feel about you?"

"I'm sure the feeling is mutual. But it hardly matters now that I have such complete control over you. I suggest you take a more humble approach."

But Tick wasn't done sharing a piece of his mind. "And what's all that garbage about making the Realities better? All you want is power, and you know it. You don't care about anyone but yourself."

Chu's face flashed with anger, and he leaned in closer to Tick. His bad breath wafted to Tick's nose and made him want to squirm out of the bed. "You shut that mouth of yours, do you hear me? Shut your mouth and show me some respect. You could never possibly understand me or my motives. I'll do what needs to be done, and no one can stop me. Yes, I may have a petty streak in me, and I may have done a few things that I might not be proud of, which is unfortunate for you because when I'm done using you, I'm going to dispose of you in a way that brings me a great deal of satisfaction. It's something you can start looking forward to."

Tick lashed out, but the restraints held his arms in place. He was furious and had never wanted to hit another person so much in his life. But he slouched back down onto the bed, knowing he couldn't be stupid enough to try anything with his power over Chi'karda. He'd just have to be patient and wait for the right opportunity to come along.

But at least he had his words. "You're a pathetic man, Chu. How can you even look yourself in the mirror tonight after standing there and talking like that to someone who's not even fifteen years old yet? Pathetic and sad."

Chu, of course, did the most maddening thing then. He laughed as he straightened back up to stand tall. "Don't goad me on, kid. You can yap all day if you want about how young you are, but we all know the power that's trapped inside your child's body. And we all know why."

Tick paused, surprised by the odd statement. Even though he hated to let go of his anger, he had to know what the man meant. "What . . . why . . . why what?"

Chu raised his eyebrows. "Don't play dumb with me, boy. Reginald Chu knows all—or at least what he cares to."

Tick started to sit up before he remembered the restraints. Groaning in frustration, he closed his eyes then opened them again. He needed to find some humility. "I'm serious. I don't know what you're talking about."

"This is unbelievable. How could he keep you in the dark about this?" Chu looked at him in disbelief. "I'm talking about why *you*, of all people, have this incredible ability to manipulate and control Chi'karda. Don't tell me that old man George hasn't explained it to you yet. He knows. He went well out of his way to confirm it."

Tick was dumbfounded. "*What* does he know?"

Chu folded his arms and peered down at him, slowly shaking his head. "Soulikens, Atticus. It's all about the soulikens."



Poor Little Centipede

Sweat poured down Sato's face, and it wasn't just from the effort of digging through and tossing aside the countless broken stones that had lain between him and the source of the glowing light at his feet. He was nervous because the massive storm of the Void was growing louder and bigger, its shadow looming over him, Tollaseat, and the dug-out pit in which they stood. They needed to figure out this anomaly and get away from there.

He got down on one knee and inspected the source of the light. It was a slit in the floor, about three feet long and a few inches wide. Although it wasn't really *in* the floor—it was more like the rip in Reality he'd seen before when the gray fog had first appeared beside the castle walls. Blue light shone from behind the odd crack in the air, so intense that it was hard to look at it directly. There was nothing else there, as if it were a small window into a river of radioactive material or something otherworldly. The light continued to pulse, flashing every few seconds so brightly that it was blinding.

"How're we s'posed to figure what she might be?" Tollaseat asked. The man was too long and gangly to try to squat down next to Sato. "Took a bit of work, it did, gettin' down this far. T'would be a mighty shame to go back empty-handed, now wouldn't it?"

Sato thought Mothball's dad had an uncanny gift for saying a lot of words that offered no help whatsoever. "I don't know. Just let me think for a second."

He did try to think, and that didn't help either. He wasn't a scientist. Somehow he'd become the captain of an army, for crying out loud. But he knew without any doubt that this small spit of shining blue light had something to do with . . . something.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a centipede creeping along a broken slab of stone. Testing some theory on the edge of his mind, he picked up the poor little thing and tossed it into the slice of pulsing light. The bug disappeared in a tiny burst of white electricity, tiny jagged bolts skittering across the blue surface before dying out. There was no sign of the critter.

"Well, ain't you a cruel one," Tollaseat chided him from above. "What

did that wee bugger ever do to you?”

Sato stood up, letting out a big sigh as he did so. “I was just putting him out of his misery. Pretty soon this whole place will be eaten up by . . . whatever that is out there.” He jabbed a thumb in the direction of the tornado, then gave one last glance to the blue anomaly. “It was just an experiment. I thought maybe something would happen. Look, I have no idea what to do here. We’ll just have to describe it to Master George and see what he thinks. Come on, let’s go.”

The two of them started up the pile of rocks they’d burrowed out of before. Sato was halfway to the top when he heard a horrible roar, like something half-mechanical and half-animal. It was followed by shouts from his soldiers.

His heart sank, and his first thought was, *What now?*

He picked up the pace and scrambled the rest of the way, almost falling twice as pieces of stone tore loose or broke off. When he reached the peak of the debris, he balanced himself and stood up, Tollaseat right beside him.

Something monstrous was crawling out of the churning mass of the Void’s huge tornado. It was big and long, with lightning arcing along its gray skin. With a terrifying dawn of awareness, Sato realized that the thing looked like . . .

It looked like a *centipede*.



Paul was just about to slip into the laboratory of the Realitant headquarters when Sofia spotted him from down the hallway. *Great*, he thought. He’d almost made it.

She ran up to him. “What in the world are you doing? I looked all over for you. Master George is *not* happy.”

“Hey, it’s not my fault those idiots can’t figure out what we’re supposed to do next.”

“*Idiots?*” she repeated. “Really? You’re calling *them* idiots?”



“Very funny. Look, I might not be the smartest tool in this workshop, but

at least I don't think it's okay to sit around fiddling my thumbs. I think it's high time you and I figured out something on our own."

Sofia rolled her eyes, but he saw some compassion in there too. She was trying to keep everyone happy on both sides of the fence. "Paul, you know very well that not a single person here is fiddling their thumbs. The rest of them are analyzing data, talking to other Realitants, and researching. They're trying to learn more about the Void and its energy so we can beat it. I was just coming to find you to help. We need every set of eyes."

"I'll tell you what the Void is," Paul said. "It's a big gray tornado that's getting bigger the longer we stand around here. We need Tick to go in there and . . . do whatever it is he does. Our *friend* is obviously in trouble, and that should be our number-one priority. Getting him *back*."

"And you really think Master George disagrees with that?" She folded her arms. "They can't latch onto his nanolocator. Mothball went to Deer Park but saw no sign of him. His dad said he never showed up. We can't go looking behind every rock and tree in the universe."

"Oh . . . oh, man." The news made Paul wilt inside. "There's gotta be a way to find him."

Sofia sighed. "Rutger will keep scanning for him, hope he pops back onto the radar."

"Tick should be our—"

"—number-one priority. I know! Don't you think I'm worried like crazy too? I just think we should all work together, not sneak around like this. What are you doing here anyway?"

Paul couldn't keep a secret from her, not now. "I came for the box."

"The box?"

"The box."

Her mouth was slightly open, her expression saying that she had no doubt he'd gone nuts. "And why are you going for the box?"

"Because I'm going to push the green button."

"No, you're not."

"Yes, I am."

"We don't even know what it does yet!"

"George does, or else he wouldn't have made us go get it." Paul reached out and opened the lab door. He'd seen their leader put the box into a cabinet drawer, even though the old man had tried to keep it a secret. The drawer wasn't a safe, though. It didn't have a lock or anything. Maybe George thought if the box was hidden in a place people wouldn't suspect, it might be safer.

“Paul, don’t.”

He ignored her and stepped into the room. When she didn’t reach out and yank him back by the collar, he knew he had her. Times had grown desperate, and it was time to *do* something desperate. Before either one of them could change their minds, he ran over to the cabinet. She followed right on his heels. Paul ripped open the drawer.

The drawer was empty.

“I thought you might come looking for this,” a voice said from behind them.

They spun around to see Master George at the lab door, bouncing the box with its little green button in his right hand. At first Paul thought that Sofia might’ve betrayed him, but one glance at her showed that she was just as surprised—and disappointed—at their leader’s arrival.

“I just wanted to . . .” Paul began, but didn’t know how to finish.

“Yes, I know,” George said. “You just wanted to help, I’m sure. I guess it’s time we had a talk about this very special device. It’s time I told you about Karma. And then it may very well be time to push this button.”



One with Reality

Chu had refused to say another word after announcing that it was “all about the soulikens.” Tick knew soulikens were imprints of energy created by life and memories and thoughts. Stamps of life on Reality. They accumulated throughout one’s existence until their signature hung around them like an aura. The Haunce—the most amazing creature Tick had ever met—was made up of trillions of soulikens.

Tick had an idea of what Chu meant. Most of his Alterants—if not all—had died at some point. Maybe their soulikens had somehow bled to him. Maybe that could explain the powers he had. He’d never wanted to talk to Master George so badly.

But that would have to wait. The gurney on which he lay had been rolled out of that hospital-like room by a man and a woman dressed in blue scrubs then down a long hallway and into an auditorium with rows and rows of chairs and a stage. Draped behind the stage was a huge screen of white material. The workers pushed him about halfway down the aisle then raised the back of the bed so Tick was able to sit up. His arms, legs, and torso were still fastened tightly down by the thin cords of metal. And his Chi’karda was still being blocked.

Chu had walked the entire way beside them, silent and brooding. He dismissed the blue-clad man and woman, leaving him and Tick alone inside the auditorium. The room was barely lit and cold; it was about as uninviting a room as Tick could imagine.

He looked at Chu, but the man was staring at the large screen, his hands folded in front of him. For at least two minutes he said nothing, which drove Tick batty. But he refused to say anything either, because he knew the man was waiting for him to do so.

Finally, Chu gave in and spoke. “Have you ever seen a fire, Atticus?” He still stared ahead, not turning to face Tick.

It certainly wasn’t the question he’d expected. “A fire? Of course I’ve seen a fire. I’ve *made* fire. You saw me do it in the Nonex.”

Chu seemed unfazed, in full business mode. Eerily, he reminded Tick of

the other Mr. Chu, his science teacher, when he was about to begin yet another lecture that he thought would change his students' lives forever.

"So then, you have, in fact, seen a fire before?" the man said.

Tick wasn't going to be baited into anger. "Yes. I've seen a fire. Many times."

"Then you know about matter changing from one form to another. In your own experience, you've seen—and caused to happen—a solid molecular structure turn into a gas. Wood to flame. There are countless other examples of the physical makeup of one substance *changing* into another substance. Water evaporating, the decay of leaves, and so on and so forth."

Tick nodded. He had to admit he was intrigued, and he had no choice but to listen anyway.

"You're going to help me do that, Atticus. You're going to help me harness the power of Chi'karda and the Void that is escaping from the Fourth Dimension. And then you're going to make me—and Mistress Jane—one with them."

Tick felt an unpleasant flutter in his chest. He couldn't find any words. Chu was talking about something beyond evil, even though Tick didn't understand it fully yet.

The man finally turned and faced him, and there was something fanatical in his expression. "*One*, Atticus. You're going to make us *one* with Reality. The universe will never be the same."



The creature was as big as a bus. Bulky and thick, with dozens of legs protruding from its gray-skinned body. Sato watched in sick fascination as the monster birthed itself out of the spinning mass of the Void then lumbered its way across the remaining span of castle ruins toward his army. The giant centipede's skin was slick with wetness, arcs of lightning flashing along the surface.

Sato was reckless as he jumped and ran over broken stones and bricks, knowing he might break an ankle at any second. But this centipede creature from the Void was heading straight for the Fifth Army, and he wanted to be there to help fight it. As he picked and leaped his way along, frantically looking for the next spot to land a foot before he jumped again, thoughts tore through his mind. This couldn't be a coincidence. He'd thrown the bug into that blue light, and soon after, only only only a monstrous version of it had emerged from the Void. Earlier, gray monsters that looked like creations of Mistress Jane's had come out of the tornado—most likely after having been sucked into the blue light.

And it scared him that the one place the newest creature decided to go

was to a campsite full of people, which meant it could probably *think*. And that it wanted to kill and destroy. At least, he assumed so. A few seconds later, his suspicions were confirmed.

One of the many legs on the creature suddenly ripped off the main body, spinning away like a boomerang, headed for the center of Sato's army, which was gathering for battle. The shaft of gray fog flew through the air about forty feet then suddenly erupted into flames, brilliant and yellow. It struck one of Sato's soldiers, a man standing bravely at the head of the front line, who'd just been pulling up his Shurric into a firing position. There was a violent explosion of sparks and fire that started but stopped almost instantly, leaping out then collapsing in on itself. It was so bright that Sato stumbled and fell, smacking his upper arm on a sharp stone.

With a grimace, he quickly looked back at the front line—amoebas of light dancing in his vision—but saw nothing. The poor man had been incinerated.

Sato heard the shouts of battle as his soldiers surged forward to fight, charging the creature as it continued to come at them. He scrambled to his feet, wincing from the pain in his shoulder—there would be one terrible bruise there before long. Tollaseat was there, helping him get up. The man said nothing, but there was a mix of sadness and fear in his eyes.

Noise filled the air: the rushing roar of the Void's spinning cloud, the cracks of thunder, the battle screams of his soldiers.

The Void monster crashed through the last part of the castle debris, landing on the ground dozens of feet from the charging Fifth Army. It righted itself and shot off another one of its legs, a three-foot-long stub of gray fog that spun through the air until it erupted into flames like its predecessor. The twirling missile of fire slammed into the body of a man, causing an explosion just like before. When the sparks and pyrotechnics collapsed again into a tiny spot and disappeared, there was no sign of the soldier.

Another leg flew off of the creature, doing the same trick. Spinning, erupting into flames, flying toward a soldier. This time it was a woman. She was ready, though, and held her ground. She lifted her Shurric and, with patience that Sato couldn't believe, took the time to aim and fire her weapon at the heart of the incoming attack. The thump of pure sound wave was too deep to be heard, but Sato felt a rattle in his bones. The force of power slammed into the spinning projectile and ruptured it, sending small spits of flame and sparks in a million directions. But no one was harmed.

Sato grinned. They could do this. They *could* beat this thing.

He picked up his pace across the ruins, watching as his army attacked the creature with everything they had. The creature was dead by the time he got there.



Good and Evil

Master George had taken Paul and Sofia to a small, private room located in the deepest part of the headquarters, far below the surface of the Upper Rim of the Grand Canyon. Unmarked, it could've passed for a utility closet. It held only a table and four chairs, nothing else.

"I come here sometimes when I need a bit of time to myself," the old man said wearily after they'd taken their seats. He held Gretel's box in his hands under the table. "And to be quite frank, I'm at a loss right now. I can barely face my dear old friends, Mothball and the rest. I've always felt as if I have known the direction to take, even in the most dire of circumstances we've faced. But not now. I'm at a loss, indeed. It's no wonder I wanted to hide in this room. I very much appreciate you taking refuge along with me."

Paul looked over at Sofia. Had the geezer really given up?

Sofia reached out and patted George's shoulder. "Everything kind of took a crazy turn," she said soothingly. "But we'll figure things out."

"Yeah," Paul agreed. What he really wanted was to find out more about the box. And the button. "So can that box do something to help? Are we really going to push the button?"

Sofia shot him a glare. "Seriously? I guess there's only room enough in that brain of yours for one thing at a time." She winked, then, taking away the sting of her words.

He felt a nice flutter inside. "I'm just saying. Things are messed up beyond belief, and we went on a special mission to get that box, so it must be important. We need all the help we can get, don't we?"

Sofia didn't answer at first, just looked back at Master George. "He's right. It might be time to do something a little drastic."

Their leader nodded slowly as he stared at the table. "I couldn't agree more, Sofia. I fear we've come to a place in our journey where we need something a little . . . beyond the regular means. We know so little of this Void from the Fourth Dimension that I'm afraid we need your minds and skills more than ever. We can't rely on Mistress Jane to teach us about the threat that churns inside the Thirteenth Reality. At least when we faced the

Blade of Shattered Hope—and the Dark Infinity weapon before that—there was a path before us. Possibilities. Like I’ve said, this time around, I’m at a bitter loss. You two need to step it up.”

Paul couldn’t help the impatience that wanted to burst out of him at the seams. “So . . . then what are you saying?”

George pulled his hands up from his lap and placed the small metal box on the table in front of him. The green button was like a beacon, and Paul had to resist the urge to reach out and push it right that second.

“This is your assignment,” George pronounced. “But before I tell you about this box, we need to talk about a very important subject. Very important, indeed. It’s something that is almost as beyond our understanding as this Void that plagues us presently. And that subject is . . . Karma.”

He’d said that word earlier, but now it had a haunted, foreboding ring to it. Paul leaned forward, eager to hear more.

“There’s a reason talking about this makes me . . . uncomfortable,” George continued. “I’m a scientist, and I know both of you are well aware of that fact. I’m a scientist above all else. And that means that everything I live for is grounded in a solid foundation of tested theories, facts, and proofs. Many of the things you’ve seen and experienced since being recruited—goodness gracious me, that seems like decades ago—may appear to be magic to many people. To *ordinary* people. But my favorite two words, *quantum physics*, have always been able to explain it all. *Kyoopy*, I believe it’s been coined before.”

He paused, a look of blissful contemplation on his face. But then he shook his head and snapped out of it. His expression grew very serious. “But this . . . this is something that is a little less certain. A part of our cosmos that is beyond our capacity to comprehend fully. Or beyond mine, at any rate.”



“Karma?” Sofia asked.

“Karma,” the old man confirmed.

“Everyone knows what that means,” Paul said. “Basically, what goes around, comes around. Right?”

“To put it simply, yes.” George looked down at the box then back at Paul. “The notion that the universe pays back what people deposit is something that has been a part of human culture since the beginning of recorded history. Be a good person, do good things, and then good things will happen to you eventually. Be a *bad* person, do *bad* things . . . well, then quite the opposite. One way or another, your actions always come back to you. Repayment of what you’ve dealt. Almost every civilization has believed in the concept in some form. *Karma* is just the most commonly used word to describe the phenomenon.”

Paul was fascinated. “And this button has something to do with it?”

George nodded, holding up the box as if inspecting it for flaws. “Yes, it does. There have been those in our ranks who believe Karma is a scientific principle as rigid as gravity. And, *like* gravity, they accept it one hundred percent, even though they can’t quite explain why it happens or how it works.”

“*They?*” Sofia repeated. “You mean you don’t believe in it like some of the others?”

“It’s as I’ve said. I have difficulty accepting something that’s not grounded in solid scientific principle and analysis. But the gravity example is a good one. No rational person could possibly argue that gravity doesn’t exist, despite our inability to understand it fully. Likewise, evidence of Karma is rampant. And it’s possible—and strongly believed by some, in fact—that it can be gathered and manipulated, just like Chi’karda can be with the Chi’karda Drives we have inside our Barrier Wands that power them and make them work.”

“So that’s what this box is?” Paul asked. “A . . . Karma Drive?”

George looked at him, his eyebrows lifted in slight surprise. “Why, yes, that’s *precisely* what it is, Master Paul. Precisely. This box was built by a small group of Realitants, led by Gretel, with some extremely speculative and revolutionary technology. It took them a full decade—exhausting work. Two of the members of the team went mad and had to be discharged from our society. But Gretel believes strongly that she and her team were successful, and that they’ve created a mechanism that will harness Karma and concentrate it for one purpose. Just like a Barrier Wand.”

Sofia reached out to touch the box, but George pulled it away. “No, no. We must be very careful how we decide to proceed in this matter.”

“Karma’s a good thing, right?” Paul asked. “Let’s just push the button

and hope for the best.” Even as he said it, he knew he couldn’t possibly sound *less* like the scientist he was supposed to be. But he was mostly joking. Mostly.

“My good man, use your brain. After all that effort and work, no one has ever pushed this button before. Gretel believes that the power will swirl and coalesce around the one who holds the box, infusing them and their surroundings with Karma to use for whatever purpose the bearer may need.”

“Well,” Paul countered, “I’d say we’re in pretty bad shape, so maybe now is a good time to try it. You’re the one who says you don’t really know what to do about the Void. Let’s push the button, and then maybe Sofia and I can figure out how to use the power.”

George pulled the box back into his lap. “You haven’t understood what I’ve told you if you think we should be so hasty. Remember what Karma does. I believe you said it this way: ‘What goes around, comes around.’ In a way it magnifies, significantly, good or evil.”

“Yeah? So what?” Paul pushed, a little sarcastically.

“That’s all very well if the power latches on to something good.” George pursed his lips and shook his head dramatically. “And I daresay the both of you are as good as it gets. But if it somehow got into the hands of someone *evil*, then we’d all be in very much trouble, indeed.”



Brainpower

The Void was a monster now.

Sato and his troops had retreated to the edge of the forest, watching the gray mass continue to grow.

There was nothing left of Mistress Jane's castle. The churning, spinning cloud was now two or three miles wide, its edges a chaotic dance of lightning and boiling tendrils of gray mist. The vortex was probably half a mile tall, blocking out the sun. Thunder pounded the air, and the darkness of a heavy storm cast a gloomy mood over everything.

No one could have felt it any deeper than Sato. There were things to learn here. Terrible, awful things. He had to talk to Master George, tell him about the centipede experiment.

"Tollaseat!" he called out.

The man was a few dozen feet away, but came running. When he pulled up at Sato's side, he looked haggard and exhausted.

"Yes, Captain?" he asked.

Sato took one last glance at the growing Void, hoping he'd never have to see it again. How were they supposed to fight such a thing? They needed brainpower.

"Let's get everybody deeper into the woods," he said, hearing the defeat in his own voice. "I'll contact Master George and have him wink us somewhere safe. We're done here."



Tick lay in the dark, staring up at a ceiling he couldn't see. Chu had put him in a room with no windows and then turned off the lights. Just to make him angry, probably. Just to show him who was in control. It obviously still rankled the man that a teenager had more power than he did.

What a mess. Tick's chest hurt from holding in so much stress and despair. He longed for those few moments after escaping the Nonex, seeing his mom and sister, thinking that maybe all would be right in the world again. How wrong he'd been.

As if the Void weren't enough of a problem, he'd been captured by a man insane with the lust for power. Chu had explained to him a few things, had even shown him a video feed using a Spinner on the screen in the auditorium. It basically boiled down to one simple fact: Chu wanted to harness the incredible amounts of energy he believed emanated from the Void currently devouring the Thirteenth Reality, then use it to *meld* himself—and, evidently, Mistress Jane—with Reality itself. It sounded similar to what Tick had accidentally done to Mistress Jane—melding *her* with Dark Infinity—so long ago.

Chu claimed that once he'd accomplished that task, it would be easy for him to stop the Void and force it to return to the Fourth Dimension. Then he and Jane would use their godlike powers to rule the Realities in a way no one would have thought possible. It was such an impossible idea that Tick couldn't even grasp it. And he highly doubted those two actually trusted each other. Each one of them probably thought there'd only be one left to rule in the end. Each one probably saw the other only as a means to an end.

But Tick was scared. He knew better than to underestimate Reginald Chu. The man was psycho, but he was a scientist through and through. There was no way he'd pretend he could do magical things. If Chu thought this scheme was possible, then it probably *was* possible. And that turned Tick's fear into terror.

He tried to rest up. He needed to be ready when the time came to act.



A Little Help, Here

Mistress Jane was exhausted. Not physically—she'd gotten plenty of sleep over the last couple of days inside her apartment—but her mind was spent from all the research. Every waking moment, she had been poring through her old notes, her computer files, her books. She needed to know everything about the Fourth Dimension, and the Void that had once been trapped within it, before she went to Chu's rebuilt headquarters.

She'd winked herself to a lonely mountaintop in the Thirteenth Reality, a place where she'd come before to meditate and scheme. Two things she did very well and needed to do now. But the main reason she'd chosen the location was so she could see the latest developments of the Void that had ripped her beloved castle to pieces, and, by the looks of it, had proceeded to eat the remains as well. The enormous spinning cloud of gray mist looked almost peaceful from this far away, the thunder just a low rumble rolling across the land. But she knew the Void was terrible, without compassion.

It would grow. And it would destroy. And once this world was gone, the other Realities would follow. The energy and power of the Void was a thing of awe, a thing that would make most people cower and shake with fear. But not her. She'd had her moment of doubt, and it had passed. Now she was here, facing the beast that threatened to destroy everything she'd devoted her life to. She faced it, and saw only opportunity now. Opportunity to build the Utopia of which she'd always dreamed.

Power. Energy. Unlimited.

There was a way to capture that, to harness it. To divert it from its current path and use it for better purposes. But she needed help, at least for now.

Yes, with some help, she could do great things with this Void of Mist and Thunder. This Void that represented the pure power of creation. Great things indeed.

It was time to reunite with Reginald Chu and Atticus Higginbottom.



Paul was pretty sure he could've talked Master George into taking a risk

and pushing that green button, but they were interrupted. Rutger, waddling and sweating like never before, burst into the room, his words spilling out between ragged breaths.

“Good grief . . . people!” he shouted. “Why . . . it took me . . . forever . . . to find you!”

George shot up from his chair and asked what was wrong. Eventually Rutger managed to say that Sato had made contact with headquarters, asking for a good spot of Chi’karda in the Forest of Plague. Rutger, with the help of Mothball and Sally, had been able to wink Sato and the rest of the Fifth Army out of the Thirteenth Reality, and now most of them were down in the valley of the Grand Canyon, washing in the river, eating some much-needed food, resting, and recovering.

Paul sat with Sofia on the couch in George’s office, waiting for the old man to return with Sato and the other Realitants. They needed to hear the entire story, and their leader said he wanted to wait until everyone was gathered to do it. But Paul had heard enough of the tidbits to have a sickness in his belly. The Void growing bigger, more soldiers dying, something about a blue light that turned things into monsters.

Yeah, none of that sounded too good.

Sofia’s knees were bouncing.

“Hey,” Paul said to her. “Chill. We’re going to figure out all this junk. You’ll see.”

She stopped moving, and her face flushed red as if embarrassed. “I’m not nervous.”

“Yeah, right.”

“And you’re not? You just want to *chill*, huh?”

Paul shrugged. “I have a good feeling about this box and its button. About the Karma thing. I mean, that’s the definition of Karma! The Realitants have always been good, trying to do what’s right. And now things are going to come around for us. We’re going to get some help from the cosmos, or Karma, or whatever you wanna call it. All we have to do is push that button.”

Sofia scooted away on the couch to face him, flashing her standard glare. “Seriously? You think the world’s so simple that you can push a button on a tiny box, and everything will be all better? You thought you were smart enough to join the Realitants?” She folded her arms and looked away. “Unbelievable.”

It surprised him how much his feelings were hurt. “I’m just trying to show some hope here. There has to be a reason for that box, right? It’s supposed to scientifically channel Karma matter. But to me, it’s Karma that we even have it in the first place. What’s wrong with a little hope? Geez.”

Sofia was suddenly at his side, pulling him into a fierce hug, crying into his shoulder and shaking with sobs. When he recovered from his shock, he hugged back, patting her uncertainly.

“It’s okay,” he said. “Somehow it’s going to be okay. Trust your old Uncle Paul.”

She pulled away and laughed over her sniffles. “*Uncle Paul?* Please don’t ever call yourself that again.” She wiped at her eyes and nose then cleaned her hands on her pants, which somehow made Paul like her just a little bit more.

“You can call me whatever you want.”

“Oh, man, I’m so embarrassed. I can’t remember the last time I broke down like that.”

“Please, girl,” Paul said. “You’ve been the toughest one out of all of us. Or did you forget your little jaunt through Chu’s mountain building while the whole thing was falling down, saving Tick, then pulling him out at the last second? You can cry all you want—no one’s gonna say boo.”

“It just all hit me at once.” She’d stopped crying, fully composed just like that, but with puffy red eyes to show for it. “Seems like we can’t get ahead before the next bad, awful, terrible thing happens. And now Tick’s missing. *Again.* And we still don’t know how to stop this stupid Void of Mist and Thunder.”

Paul had absolutely no idea what to say to make her feel better. Or how to make *himself* feel better. “I just . . . I don’t know. Tick can take care of himself—I’m not as worried about him anymore. Maybe he just wanted to be with his family for a while. Or if he’s in trouble, he’ll get out of it. As for our other problems . . . well, all we can do is hope for something. Right? Karma. A breakthrough. A brilliant idea. Maybe the Fourth Dimension will call and make the Void go home.”

Sofia laughed again. “I vote for that last one.”

She’d just spoken when the door opened and Master George came through, Muffintops perched on his shoulder like a parrot on an old sea pirate. Paul didn’t know if it looked creepy or hilarious. Mothball came next, then Rutger—his face red from the exertion of coming up from the canyon floor, even though it was mostly via elevator—then Sally. Finally, Sato, who had cleaned up and eaten but still looked like he’d been dragged down a mountain by a billy goat.

Sofia jumped off the couch and gave him a hug. He didn’t respond much, his eyes cast to the floor.

Man, Paul thought. *That is one haunted dude.* “Hey,” he said. “I’m glad you made it back safely.”

Sato gave him a weary look, and it was obvious that he wanted to say something, but he held it back and took a seat on one of the plush chairs. The others did the same as Master George went over and lit up the fire. The guy loved his fires. Then he turned to face his small group of Realitants.

“My dear friends and associates,” he announced gravely. “I’m afraid that our deepest fears regarding the Void have only skimmed the surface. It’s now time for action, and we’re all going to do our part. But there’s something we need to do together before we split up.”

“And what’s that?” Paul asked.

George looked at him for a long moment. “I believe with all of my heart that I’ve found the two people I trust most with the power of Karma. We’re going to push your favorite button, Master Paul. And we’re going to do it this very minute.”

Paul realized he was smiling.

“And then,” George continued, “I’m going to trust you and Sofia to figure out what to do with its power.”



I Amaze Even Myself

A light went on, blinding Tick even though he had his eyes closed. After opening them on instinct, he had to squint until he finally got used to it. A shadow crossed his vision, then there was the scrape of a chair across a tile floor then the settling sounds of someone getting comfortable. Tick could finally see that it was Chu sitting next to his bed. Tick had to twist his neck uncomfortably to see him because of the restraints holding down his arms and legs and torso.

“What do you want?” he asked, trying to sound angry but having lost all of his spirit after being held captive in a dark room for hours. He’d been tempted to try his powers of Chi’karda, but he couldn’t quite bring up the nerve. The memory of what had happened to him the last time still scarred his thoughts.

“It’s almost time for us to act,” the man said calmly.

Tick looked back up at the ceiling so his neck wouldn’t hurt, and because he couldn’t stand the calm expression on Chu’s face right then.

“Jane will be here soon,” Chu continued.

“To act, huh?” Tick asked. “We’re just going to grab some ropes, lasso the Void from the Fourth Dimension, mix it up with some sugar in a glass, then let you drink it? Piece of cake.”

Chu remained unfazed. “That’s a very unscientific way to put it, but I guess it’s not too far from the truth. Great things, Atticus. You’re going to be a part of great things in the next couple of days.”

“You *do* realize this is crazy, right?”

“There have been those throughout history who have misjudged brilliance for madness. I can assure you this is not the case. Most men simply can’t comprehend the speed and level at which someone like myself utilizes the functions of my brain. It’s something I’ve grown to appreciate and admire about myself.”

Tick laughed—he couldn’t help it. “You didn’t really just say that.”

“How can anyone not admire greatness?” Chu asked in a sincerely

astonished voice. “Can I help it that the greatness is within my own being? No, I can’t. I don’t deal in such things as pride and humility. I’m a scientist, and things are as they are. No more, no less.”

“You keep telling yourself that,” Tick muttered.

“If you’re done with childish discussions,” Chu said sternly, “then perhaps we can move on to the important matters at hand.”

“Do you really think I’m going to help you?” Tick asked. It really did baffle him. “I might be a little shy right now about pulling out my Chi’karda, but when push comes to shove, you *know* I’m going to do whatever it takes to stop you.”

“I have ways to change your mind. But I don’t think I’ll need them. By the time we’re ready, I think you’re going to do exactly what I ask. Voluntarily. You’ll *want* to, in fact.”

Tick decided to quit talking. It was pointless, and the man was probably trying to manipulate him anyway. *Let him think whatever he wants*, Tick told himself. He knew that in the end, he’d die before he let Chu follow through with his schemes.

“Silence,” the man said. “Maybe that’s the best thing for you now anyway. You can shut your mouth, but not your ears. Nothing like a . . . *captive* audience. There are a lot of things I need to—”

whomp

A thrumming vibration shook the air, cutting off Chu’s words.

Tick instinctively tried to sit up, but the metal cords dug into his skin, and he slammed back onto the bed again. That sound, that tingle in the air . . .

whomp

Chu had frozen, his face caught in a look of childish fear.

whomp

Tick had heard this noise before. *Felt* it before. He’d been walking on the road that led to his house in Deer Park when a wave of power and sound and feeling had reached him. It had been coming from his house, and when he’d run home, he’d discovered Mistress Jane in his basement, scheming very bad things.

whomp

“Does she always have to make such a grand entrance?” Chu whispered, having lost all of his bravado from a minute before. Tick thought the woman must still scare him, even though she’d obviously agreed to work with him.

whomp

The sound was getting louder, the vibration stronger. Things in the room rattled.

“It’s Jane, alright,” Tick said, seeing an opportunity. “She told the Realitants how dangerous you are. She’ll betray you the second she doesn’t need you anymore.”

WHOMP

This time, the entire room shook as if struck by an earthquake. A cabinet in the corner of the room fell over, tossing supplies everywhere. Chu stood with his arms outstretched, as if he could ward off the threat.

“You can’t trust her!” Tick yelled at him. “Let me go so I can help!” He almost felt ridiculous—it was obvious he’d say anything to be released.

WHOMP!

This time the sound and vibration was followed by a hissing noise, like sand running down a metal slide. Tick looked over at the door to see it *dissolving*. He’d seen Jane use the power of Entropy before; he’d done it himself too. The particles of the door decayed toward chaos and vanished, leaving an empty hole. Mistress Jane stood in the hallway, wearing a new robe, its hood pulled over her head, hiding the red mask in shadow.

“Impressive,” Chu muttered under his breath.

Jane stepped into the room then reached up and pulled back her hood. The scarred tragedy of her head looked pitiful, but the mask held no expression.

“Sorry I’m late, Reginald,” she said in her raspy voice. “But I’m excited for the three of us to be working together again. And so soon after our last adventure.”



Box in a Circle

For some reason, Master George had decided to sit on the floor, something Paul had never seen the old man do before. It didn't seem proper for such a gentleman in a fancy suit, but he'd done it, and so the rest of them had followed his lead. The room was barely large enough for the group to fit between the couches and chairs—and the roaring fireplace at the head of it all.

But there they were. George, sitting with his legs crossed. Mothball next to him, her long, gangly legs somehow folded up into an impossibly small spot. Then Rutger, perched precariously as though he might roll away at the slightest push. Sally sat by him, looking like a lumberjack taking a long-needed break. Sato was next, all business. Sofia and Paul completed the circle, and Paul kept having the urge to reach out and take her hand. He fought it off, but kind of hoped she was feeling the same way.

A complete circle of Realitants, sitting on the floor.

The Karma box, with its enticing green button, sat on the carpet in the middle.

"I'm sad that Gretel couldn't be here with us," Master George said. "She was needed in the Third Reality. But I've decided to put my trust in her findings and research and . . . this invention . . . at this time of dire need. The box will channel the Karma that she so dearly loved to study, and once we have it within our grasp, I believe we'll be able to figure out the best way to use it."

He shot a glance at Paul, then Sofia, then at the stack of Gretel's notes piled next to them. Paul was thrilled that the two of them were being entrusted with something so important.

"I need everyone in this room to understand the gravity of the decision I've made," George continued. "Karma is nothing more than a concept. A theory. Even those I deemed experts on the mysterious substance were making educated guesses at best, dreamy wishes at worst. But they are people I trust implicitly. I believe their educated guesses may be more reliable than the most researched, documented theories of the world's renowned scientists.

In my heart, I believe this complicated device is going to do something extraordinary. And that it will help us.”

“Then let’s get on with it,” Paul muttered, trying to lighten the mood. “Time’s a wastin’. Isn’t that what they say?”

“Better to waste time than people’s bloomin’ lives, it is,” Mothball countered drily, her eyes not even looking up from the floor.

George cut in before Paul could respond. “I wouldn’t take this risk unless I thought the *risk* was worth it. I fear we’ve reached a time of desperation, and if we wait much longer, the damage may be too great to reverse. Especially with the troubling observations Master Sato made in the Thirteenth Reality.”

“Sofia and I will figure out what to do with it,” Paul urged. His hands were sweaty with anticipation. “Please just push the button. *Please.*”

“I need everyone here to—” George began.

Rutger cut him off. “Boss. You’re stalling. We wouldn’t all be sitting here on the floor like kids at bedtime if we weren’t committed. The boy is right. Push the button. We can trust Gretel that it will work.”

“Very well.”

George fidgeted in his seat, wrung his hands and cracked his knuckles, then wriggled some more. No one said a word, and Paul leaned forward. Their leader finally reached out and picked up the small metal box, gingerly, as though it were a bomb that might accidentally go off. He placed it on the floor again, right in front of his crossed legs.

“Here goes nothing,” he said. “Now, something I chose not to share with you, Master Paul, is that only two people in the Realities can push the button—me and Gretel. The device was built to read our DNA signature before it will compress. I must say, I’m quite proud that you didn’t fail my test and try to do it yourself.”

“Oh,” was all Paul said in response. Relief filled him from top to bottom.

“But once it’s pushed,” George continued, “I want you and Sofia to take it and keep it with you at all times as you study the power. The Karma will be focused on the source—the box itself—and, therefore, on whoever holds it.” He waited for Sofia’s nod. Then Paul’s. “Right. Here we go, then. May the Realities smile upon us on this troubled, troubled day.”

“And Karma,” Paul added.

Master George reached a hand to the box, pressed his thumb against the top of the button, waited a second, then pushed it all the way down.



Bending and Warping

There was a very distinct *click* when the button went down. It was louder than it should've been, it seemed to Paul, the quick bang echoing off the ceiling of the room. There were no other sounds but the crackling of the fire. Everyone else was too busy holding their breath to make a noise, waiting to see what happened.

Master George had a wide look of expectation on his face, his eyebrows raised to their fullest. He slowly and carefully removed his thumb from the button and pulled his hand back into his lap. The button didn't pop back up but instead remained inside the box, so that only the green circle of its top was visible. He handed it to Sofia.

"Hide this away," the man said. "Guard it with your life."

She nodded. "I feel something tingling across my skin."

Paul felt it, too, just barely. He strained his ears to hear anything and his eyes to see anything. Sometimes Chi'karda presented itself in the form of an orange cloud or misty sparkles. He wondered if Karma would do the same sort of thing. He hoped so—he wouldn't be able to stand it if all he felt was this tingle, no visible confirmation that something was happening. He stared, and listened, and felt with his other senses. Waited.

"I don't think it—" Rutger began to say, but he was quickly silenced by shushes from the others in the room. Chagrined, the little man seemed to roll up into a tighter ball.

Master George held up a hand, palm out. "I believe something else is happening."

There was a light rumbling in the distance, like the growl of thunder in an approaching storm. Paul and the others looked at each other with wide eyes. He wondered if they were as spooked as he was. He had a shivering chill going up and down his spine, as if someone had just said they'd seen a ghost walking down the hall and they were all now waiting for it to appear at the doorway.

The rumbling grew louder, and then the room began to shake. Just a slight tremor at first, barely noticeable. Paul put his hands on the carpet and

felt a vibration that shot right up his bones. It strengthened until there wasn't any doubt that something unusual was happening—the windows to the balcony rattled, and the picture of Muffintops that hung over the fireplace suddenly fell off its nail, crashing onto the floor. The glass in the frame broke.

Master George let out a little cry of surprise and struggled to his feet. Mothball helped him up as her long bones straightened out to stand up as well. Paul got up, he and Sofia leaning on each other for support. The shaking had escalated to an all-out earthquake, the floor jumping up and down as the walls seemed to bow in and out. There was almost something unnatural about it, as if the room was bending and stretching in impossible ways. He looked at the balcony, where the glass in the windows appeared to have had melted into a liquid, bubbling inward then back out again toward the canyon.

An uneasy feeling replaced the immediate panic from the quake. If this was the good Karma Paul had hoped for, then he wanted to go back in time and throw that box in the river.

The room swayed side to side, up and down, with no sign of stopping. The small group of Realitants had so far stood together in a daze, balancing, maybe hoping it would end. The distant sound of thunder had been replaced with something more sinister: a long, shrill whine like the high-pitched whistle of an old steam train. But intermixed with that were more disturbing noises that cut in and out—moans and groans and screams that weren't quite human.

Paul was beginning to feel dizzy and queasy, and not just from the jolting movement. He was sick that maybe he'd talked George into doing something terrible.

As if on cue, their leader finally took charge.

"Keep hold of each other!" he shouted over the increasing noise. "I don't think—rather I *hope* this isn't related to the Karma box. I'm quite sure of it. I believe we are experiencing a disturbance like the ones that have been happening since the incident with the Blade of Shattered Hope. I want to look outside, see what's going on. But we mustn't separate! Does everyone understand?"

The scene was absurd. The whole room was shaking and bending and warping in impossible ways, and the Realitants looked like old daredevils trying to balance on a high tightrope. But they all nodded their assent and held hands with each other: Mothball, Rutger, Sally, Sato, Sofia, and Paul, all in a row. Mothball held on to George as he started making his way to the balcony.

As they stumbled toward the sliding glass door, everything intensified. The walls bubbled in and out more deeply, the sight of it so disorienting that Paul was starting to wonder if maybe they'd been drugged or something. The floor bounced and rippled, making it impossible to walk a straight line. If they

hadn't been holding hands, each one of them would've been sprawled across the carpet. And the noises, awful and disturbing, were also increasing in pitch and volume. It was like a soundtrack for a haunted house, moans and groans and squeals.

George reached the door and paused. With the glass bending and warping, it seemed impossible that it could slide open. But he reached out anyway, grabbed the handle, and pushed all of his weight onto it. The door opened easily, sliding all the way to the left—even as it continued to ripple in crazy ways.

The old man turned and shouted back at them over the terrible chorus of sounds. "I've never seen anything quite like this! Something is *wrong* with Reality!"

"Ya think?" Paul murmured, but he was pretty sure no one heard him. What had they done? What had pushing that button done to Reality? It couldn't be a coincidence.

George turned back to the balcony, which looked like something seen through a sheen of water. It definitely didn't seem like a safe place to go right then, but George walked out onto the wavy, bouncy surface of the balcony floor, still holding hands with Mothball behind him, reaching out with his other hand to grab the railing. It was as shifty and rippling as everything else, but it had to be better than nothing.

When he touched the railing and took hold of it, an odd thing happened. Beginning at his hand, a distinct bulge of warped Reality shot up his arm and through his body like a wave of energy. It went down his other arm then hit Mothball, doing the same thing to her. The ball of power proceeded to go through every single Realitant like a snake swallowing a baseball until it passed through Sofia and shot up Paul's arm. He almost let go of Sofia's hand but didn't. He felt nothing more than a tickle and a surge of static electricity along his skin, his hair shooting up on end. But then the energy traveled down his other arm and disappeared.

Master George was still clasping the rail of the balcony, and even that was a weird sight. The rail was moving, wavering like a mirage, but the old man's arm seemed to be solid. Two things happening at once? That wasn't possible. George faced the open air of the canyon, and looks of confusion passed down the Realitants. Clearly no one understood the anomaly that had passed through their bodies.

"Everyone!" George snapped, his voice muted against the awful noises that still haunted the air. "Everyone up here to have a look! Quickly, now!"

The motion of the room—the entire building, in fact—was still intense, jumping and rippling, an earthquake mixed with hallucination. But Paul and the other Realitants fought against it and surged forward, through the open

door to the balcony. They crowded close, maneuvering so that each person could look over the railing and see what Master George saw.

Two seconds earlier, Paul had thought there was no way things could get worse. But he'd been terribly wrong. He stared out at the valley of the Grand Canyon and forgot all about the rocking movement around him.

Slicing its way through midair, running between the tall, rocky walls, was a floating river. Just a hundred feet or so above the raging waters of the Colorado River, there was a wide, bright gap of intense blueness. It was long and stretched in both directions, as if a giant knife had cut through Reality and the wound bled glowing blue blood. It was the same blue glow that Sato had described dropping the centipede into.

"The Fourth Dimension has ripped open into this Reality!" George shouted.

People started falling from the rent in the air.



Odd Couple

There'd been a very long talk.

Tick lay there awkwardly, feeling like a spectator at a silent film, as Jane and Chu whispered with each other. His face was tense, and hers—the mask—showed no expression at all. On and on they talked, but Tick couldn't hear a word they said. He was getting closer and closer to giving in to his instincts and just unleashing his Chi'karda with every bit of strength he had. How could it be any worse than letting Chu do whatever he wanted with him?

Finally, Tick couldn't take it anymore.

"You two need to listen to me," he said, trying to sound more patient and reasonable than he felt. "Bad things are going on, and we all know they're getting worse. It's just like in the Nonex. We can't fight each other until we make things right again in the Realities. I promise not to fight if you will."

Tick didn't like saying the words; he didn't *want* to work with Jane or Chu, but maybe he had no other choice. He wished he could find a way to get out of his restraints so he could use his Chi'karda again.

Both Jane and Chu looked over at him. Jane's mask actually pulled up into a slight grin.

"Let me go," Tick pleaded. "I swear on my family I won't try anything. I won't hurt anybody. And I'll stay here while we talk everything out." He winced at that last sentence. Now he was trying too hard.

"Pipe down while the adults talk," Chu said. If he'd said it angrily, or meanly, Tick would've been okay with it. But he said it like he actually thought of Tick like a child, and that boiled his insides. He almost felt steam coming out of his ears.

"Please," Tick said. "You know I can help."

Chu looked back at Jane as if he hadn't heard him. "Ever since this . . . *opportunity* presented itself in your Thirteenth Reality, my people have been working on a device that can harness the power of the Void, adapting it. We can do it, Mistress Jane. We can become one with it. We can *meld ourselves* to Reality. Just like we discussed. Things have come to fruition faster than we

could've ever dreamed.”

Jane nodded her head slowly. “Don’t double cross me, Chu. I’m warning you.”

Something snapped inside of Tick. It was like a bunch of valves had been holding back the flow of Chi’karda inside him, and they all broke at once. The power almost burst out of him, but somehow he grabbed it at the last second, held it at bay. But he couldn’t keep the words from tumbling out.

“That’s enough!” he yelled. “I swear, if you two don’t stop acting like I’m not here, I’m going to let it all out, no matter what happens. It’s like a dam over here, and it’s about to break! Take these straps off of me. Now!”

His heart raced, and he could feel his limbs shaking, the blood rushing to his head and face. Heat ebbed along his skin, as if his pores were straining from exertion, the orange might of Chi’karda trying to burst through.

“Let me go!” he shouted.

He saw a flash of fear in Chu’s eyes before the man tried to hide it. Jane was no longer smiling. But neither one of them moved.

“Let me—”

He didn’t finish the sentence. A sudden jolt hit the room, shaking it so intensely and violently that all other thoughts vanished from Tick’s mind, as instant as the flip of a light switch. The overpowering surge of Chi’karda disappeared as well, making him feel empty and scared. The room slammed toward the side, then sprang back the next second. Chu and Jane both fell down, sprawling over each other in a tangle of arms, legs, and the folds of her yellow robe.

It all happened so fast, like a speed bump in time. The room had barely stabilized before it began to shake again, this time more steadily, growing in strength. Chu and Jane were scrambling to get to their feet, reaching out to hold on to Tick’s bed. Things fell off the shelves, rattled across the floor. Tick was helpless, holding on to the sheets as if they’d give him any protection—the straps held him down as firmly as ever.

And the Chi’karda really was gone. Completely. He even reached for it again, wanting to feel its power and comfort, but it was like something had blocked it *within* him. He couldn’t find a single trace.

He was looking at Chu when everything in the room went completely crazy. Walls started bubbling outward, and the floor looked as if it had turned into liquid, waves running through the tile without breaking them. The bed jumped up and slammed back down again, and Jane and Chu lost their balance, sprawling out on the rippling floor once more. The ceiling bulged in the middle, as if water were collecting there. None of it seemed physically possible.

And then the horrible sounds started.



Holding Hands

Paul had never seen Master George move so fast.

The old man seemed to lose thirty years in age once he spotted the frightening and impossible sight of bodies falling from a long, blue rent in the air. He turned on his heels and bolted back through the balcony door, pulling everyone else along with him as best he could. They eventually all made it—struggling against the disorienting sights that continued to warp and bend all around them—Sofia and Paul at the tail end. The Realitants were still holding hands, helping each other as they took turns losing and regaining their balance.

“We must get down there straightaway,” George called over his shoulder as he headed for the hallway. “After a quick detour to grab my Barrier Wand, as we may have to get ourselves far from this place.”

Sofia stopped, and everyone looked back at her. “You guys go. I need to head to the operations center. I can feel . . . it. I can *feel* the Karma. I think if I can study Gretel’s notes—the whole team’s notes from that time—I can figure things out.”

“I’ll help you,” Paul added immediately. He felt it too. Even as Reality broke up all around him, he felt a power like electricity trickling through his veins.

Master George looked proud, shockingly not offering one ounce of protest. “Rutger,” he commanded. “Take them there at once. Give them access to everything. The others—with me.”

Paul’s heart leaped as Sofia grabbed the notes from the floor. They followed Rutger, fighting to keep their balance the whole way there.



Chu’s face was pale with terror.

Tick didn’t understand it. He’d thought the man was brave and ruthless, but now he looked like a toddler who’d lost his mommy at the shopping mall. He swayed on his feet as the entire room shook and wobbled, his eyes darting this way and that in a steady flare of panic. Jane was close to him but seemed

much calmer as she mildly took a step when needed to keep herself from falling to the floor again.

And then there was Tick. Strapped to the bed, unable to even touch the slightest bit of his Chi'karda. The madness of everything seeming to have lost its solid structure was made ten times worse by the sounds of moaning and wailing that flew through the air. That, and the fact that Tick couldn't do anything, not even run.

"You've gotta let me go!" he yelled at Chu, hoping to take advantage of the man's obvious terror. "Something really bad is happening, and I can probably help stop it! Take these stupid things off of my body!"

"He's right," Jane said.

She didn't shout the words, and Tick barely heard them, but Chu looked at her as if she'd gone crazy.

"You can't be serious!" the man yelled. "You've seen what he can do! He'll escape before we can count to three! You know that we need this boy's power for our plans! He has to be contained until we're ready!"

"And *then*?" Tick asked. "You think at the very end I'm just going to agree to do whatever you want?"

The disturbing sounds of people in pain and dying and suffering swirled through the room, joined by the creaks and groans of the building that shook around them. Everything in sight was twisted and bent, moving in impossible ways. Nothing made sense.

Jane's mask remained expressionless as she stood there, trying to keep her balance. She looked back and forth between Tick and Chu. Back and forth, as if pondering some monumental decision.

Tick kept his eyes on her, feeling so helpless he thought his chest might implode from the rage and panic trapped inside him.

"Reginald," she finally said, her raspy voice somehow cutting through the cacophony of haunts that floated in the air. "We need to leave for a few minutes to talk privately. We'll come back and get him when we're ready for his contribution."

Chu nodded absently, his eyes showing that his mind was lost in deep thought.

"What?" Tick yelled. "What are you talking about? This is crazy! You guys have to let me go!"

Jane held out a scarred hand to Chu, and he took it. Both of them were still fighting to maintain their balance amidst the quaking, but managing well enough. Hand in hand, swaying, they walked to the door of the room, opened it, then exited into the hallway. Chu swung it closed behind them.

Leaving Tick all alone.



Paul was shocked he hadn't fallen down yet, or tripped over Rutger. The entire headquarters shook like a baby's rattle, and Paul's brain was feeling like the stuff on the inside of the rattle. He stumbled left and right as he tried his best to move forward at a sharp clip. The three of them reached the data center, where Rutger was king. The short man pushed his way past Paul and Sofia and entered the room first, turning on lights and flipping the switches on monitors and machines.

"We'll get to the bottom of this," Rutger said, all business now that he could actually contribute again. "It's always in the numbers. Always."

He climbed up onto his specially-made raised chair and focused on the largest screen in the room, which was several feet wide and already filled with flashing data and colors. Sofia stood right behind him, Paul at her shoulder.

"O . . . kay . . ." Rutger said slowly, drawing out the word as he quickly scanned the data splattered across the monitor. Paul did the same, but he knew the other two would come up with something interesting before he did.

Right on cue, Rutger started in with his findings. "Chi'karda levels are extremely low in a three- to four-mile radius around the canyon headquarters, and the pocket appears to stretch along the river in both directions—probably in line with that blue streak of . . . whatever we saw in the air. There's also some kind of reading for a substance that our sensors can't identify. It has mass, and it's everywhere. My goodness, it's *everywhere*. But . . ."

He spun around in his chair and looked up at the others. "I'm not sure I can . . . I mean . . . it'll take me some time, but . . ."

Paul knew the man was probably ashamed that he didn't immediately know the explanation for the foreign force that permeated the air around the Grand Canyon. But Sofia latched on to the answer right away, excitement shining in her eyes.

"It's Karma, Rutger. It has to be!"



Down Below

Going down the elevator had been just about the scariest thing Mothball had ever done. The long ride to the bottom of the canyon floor had been riddled with sudden jolts and constant shaking, and even an unexpected drop of twenty feet or so that made everyone scream. Sally may have been the loudest, as shrill as the youngest girl on a roller coaster.

And those sounds. Like a crowd of people with the plague, waiting on death. She wanted the sounds to end, no matter what. Being in the tight confines of the elevator car made it that much worse, the noise amplified and echoing off the walls, ceiling, and floor.

Mothball had never felt such an instant rush of happiness as when they thumped onto the bottom and the doors of the lift slid open. Sunlight spilled in, though even the brightness of it looked somehow . . . *off*, like everything else. As if the light was too yellow, too disproportionate to the shadows it created.

Master George slipped through the opening as soon as the elevator doors opened wide enough, holding his Barrier Wand before him like it was a weapon. On the trip down, he'd done his best to examine the device and make adjustments to the dials and switches that ran along its one side. The button at the top—the one that would initiate the Chi'karda Drive and wink them to somewhere that was hopefully a lot safer—looked so enticing to Mothball that she almost reached out and pushed the ruddy thing herself.

They filed out of the elevator and stumbled their way along a narrow section of towering red and orange rock, finally emerging into the vast expanse of the canyon floor. Things looked just as wild there, but on a grander scale. The mighty cliffs that rose up from the rugged valley wobbled and bent and bubbled just as much as the walls inside the headquarters had, but the terror of the sight was magnified. If those cliffs cracked and crumbled, it'd be the end of the Realitants. And the end of the members of the Fifth Army, who bustled about the banks of the river, looking up at the one anomaly that outshone the rest.

The long rip in Reality ran the length of the valley, disappearing at both

ends, and hovering in the air at least a hundred yards above the ground. It shone with a glowing blue light that pulsed every few seconds, its luminescence flashing more brilliantly before fading again.

And what Mothball and the others had seen from the balcony was still happening—odd-looking bodies were falling from the blue gash, but none of them had reached the canyon floor yet. About halfway down, they were whisked away—as if caught in a stiff wind or the gale of a hurricane—toward the cliff walls on both sides of the canyon. They perched by the hundreds on jutting rocks or held on to crevices in the stone with gangly arms and legs.

And they weren't human.



Tick had finally closed his eyes, unable to take one more second of the troubling sights all around him as he lay helpless, strapped to the bed. But there was nothing he could do with his ears. Unable to use his hands to cover them, he had no choice but to listen to the awful wails and moans that streaked through the air and pounded his senses. It was as if he were in some experiment run by a madman to see how much he could scar a kid's brain for life.

He tried his best to focus his mind on other things. On the odd exchange between Jane and Chu before they'd left him alone. She'd obviously been scheming inside that head of hers and had come to a big decision—something that obviously didn't involve him yet. He hated to admit it, but he felt as if he had to place some hope in Jane, that she might turn back to those feelings she'd expressed before to him of wanting to do good. Tick didn't see how it was possible to survive this mess unless she joined forces with him against Chu and all the weird things going on with Reality.

But the sick feeling in his stomach told him the chances of that happening seemed awfully slim. There'd been something sinister about the way she'd been looking back and forth between him and Chu right before they left. And the words she had said—and the way she'd said them—made it sound as if she was up to no good at all. Maybe she'd finally slipped past some threshold from which she'd never come back. Maybe Mistress Jane was finally evil through and through.

The door popped open to reveal Chu. His face was draped in shadow, but there was something about the way he stood in the midst of the shaking that told Tick that the man had moved past his panic attack and was back to business. His next words, shouted over the terrible sounds, removed all doubt.

“We're putting you back in the Bagger, boy. Time to go for a little ride.”



Sato was finally getting his spirits back. He'd been in a daze since leaving the Thirteenth Reality, trying to come to terms with everything that had happened. But ever since George had pushed the button on that weird little box and the world had turned into a freak show, he'd slowly awakened back to his normal self. And now his first concern was the army he called his own; they were in obvious danger from the nightmare that had ripped open in the sky above them.

He ran forward a few steps, squinting against the sun to look at the creatures that had flown out of the blue gash and attached themselves to the side of the canyon cliffs. They were dark and gray and gangly, almost humanoid . . .

And then it hit him. They were too far away for Sato to get the greatest of looks, but he knew what they were. The remainder of Jane's creatures, transformed by the Fourth Dimension, were here.

Even as he had the thought, the gray monsters started scampering—and flying—toward the floor of the canyon.



Overrun

Mothball didn't like the sight of all those gray creatures descending toward them. She didn't like it at all.

"We need to get out of here!" she yelled at Master George.

But the old man was already swinging into action, holding the Barrier Wand up with both hands as he started barking orders. "Sato! Get your army over here, and quickly! We need to pack together into a group, everyone touching someone else!"

Mothball thought Sato had seemed like a new person since taking over leadership of the soldiers from the Fifth Reality. Unshakable, a true leader. But even *he* hesitated, probably in awe and fear of the weirdness of it all. There was a river of blue light running through the sky, the world was shaking, monstrous creatures of the Void were descending toward them, and it sounded like a haunted house at an amusement park.

Sato sprang into action.

As he ran around, shouting and pointing and herding his people toward where Master George stood with the Wand, Mothball and Sally huddled close to the old man. The gray creatures were almost to the canyon floor now, seeming to pick up speed the closer they got.

The army almost made it to Mothball and her group. Sato was in the very back, encouraging and pushing people away from the river toward the canyon wall, when the first wave of Void creatures overran him.



Tick didn't fight it when Chu's lab rats wheeled him out of the small room, down a hallway, and into a large chamber that looked like a massive laboratory. He didn't fight it when the lights started flashing and the banging, whirring noises overcame the now-constant and familiar sounds that haunted the air. He didn't struggle when the Bagger wrapped its cords around him again.

He didn't fight, because he wasn't able to fight. His body was strapped down, and he couldn't feel the slightest trickle of Chi'karda. He was helpless.

All the while, Jane and Chu marched along nearby, whispering to each other and making frantic arm gestures. Tick didn't know what was going on and didn't bother to ask. His heart and will were starting to give up with everything else. He needed to snap out of it, find a spark somewhere. But as with the elusive Chi'karda, he was empty.

At some point it all became too much, and, like before, when he'd been trapped inside this machine that he didn't understand, his mind sped away to a cold and dark place.

There were no dreams in that lonely place.



Sato didn't scream or cry out for help when the first claw dug into his shoulder. The sharp nails pierced his shirt and raked across his skin, slicing pain through his nerves, but it was the last straw to snap him out of his momentary dazed state and lunge him back into the soldier he'd become. He dove forward, curling into a ball and flipping over at the last second. He kicked out with his feet—landing a solid hit on something soft but solid—then jumped back up to see that the creature had tumbled across the ground. Even as Sato watched, the monster's form dissolved into a swirl of mist and was whisked up toward the sky.

Sato didn't have time to follow the path with his eyes. Dozens more of the scary things were already on him. The closest one leaped into the air—gray wings unfolding like an umbrella—then swooped in, claws reaching for his face. The unmistakable thump of a Shurric pounded the air, and the creature was ripped away before it could hurt Sato. More thumps followed from behind him. His soldiers to the rescue.

Someone threw a few Ragers at the line of fangen and other monsters, mounds of dirt and rock compacting into a giant ball of destruction before it slammed into the creatures. Most of the ones on the ground—those close to Sato, anyway—were annihilated, dissipating back to mist and swimming toward the sky in a streak of smoky haze. The fangen that leaped into the air to escape the Ragers were caught by a ruthless volley of pure sound from the Shurrics.

Sato and his army had survived the first wave of attack.

He wasted no time.

“Get to Master George!” he yelled, waving his arms to direct his soldiers. He didn't stop until every soldier was running. “Form circles around the Realitants! Face them—a hand on the person in front of you! Quickly!”

Faithful and brave, they did exactly as he commanded.



Mothball was amazed at how quickly Sato had assembled his soldiers into a formation of circles radiating out from the center, where George and the Realitants huddled as a group. Each person in the rings placed a hand on the shoulder of the person in front of them. They were ready to wink away.

“Everyone closest to me!” Master George barked when the Fifth Army was settled. The madness around them continued, and more creatures were coming, but Mothball and the others were still and silent. “Put your hands on the Wand! Its power will flow through all who are connected!”

He made a quick couple of adjustments to the dials and switches as the other Realitants reached out and gripped a spot on the cool, brassy surface.

“Do we have everyone?” George bellowed out in a loud voice.

There was a chorus of assents, but no way to confirm it for sure. Mothball knew they’d just have to get on with it and hope they didn’t leave anyone behind.

“Alright, then,” George said, though Mothball could only read his lips because he spoke so quietly.

The old man pushed the button at the top of the Wand.

Nothing happened.



A Horde of Creatures

Sato had learned an amazing amount of patience since becoming the leader of an army. But it was being tested like never before now. They'd formed up; hands were on shoulders; they'd all faced the old man like he'd told them to. Why wasn't George pushing the button already? Sato tried to look over the shoulders of the giant soldiers he called his own, but it was pointless.

The creatures were coming.

"What's he *doing* up there?" Sato finally shouted, the frustration ripping through his throat, rubbing it raw. He coughed for a few seconds. There had to be something wrong. Had to be. "Report back to me! Send it up the line! I need to know what's going on!"

The soldiers started whispering furiously to those in front of them. Sato kept his hand on the back of the woman who was crouched before him—she was still almost as tall as he was when he stood up straight—but he took a look behind him to gauge the situation. Void-twisted fangen were flying in fast, and other creatures were splashing through the river and loping across the ground. They had only a few more seconds until they'd have to battle.

"Hurry it up!" Sato screamed, even though he knew it was pointless. He was about to explode with impatience. He remembered their first visit to the Thirteenth Reality, when the Wand they'd stolen from Mistress Jane had refused to work because the witch had taken out the Chi'karda Drive. Those moments waiting for something to happen had been agonizing. Tick had winked them out, showing for the first time what a phenomenon he was. The powers he had.

But Tick wasn't here. And everything had gone nuts all around them.

The woman in front of him leaned forward to hear the message being passed backward, then snapped her head to face Sato.

"It's not workin' rightly," she said simply, as if talking about a leaky faucet.

Sato hadn't really needed to be told. "Yeah, figured that," he mumbled to himself. Then he stood up and sucked in a huge breath, ready to scream

orders. The world tilted and shook and bent. “Arm your weapons!”

He turned around to face the horde of creatures coming at them.



Tick wasn't sure when it ended. Or how much time had passed. But he woke up and looked up at a cloudy, gray sky. He felt a hard, gritty surface beneath him. Jane and Chu stood next to him, peering down impatiently, as if it were *his* fault he'd been out of it for a while. The ground shook, and his vision bent and twisted. Things were still wrong with the world, but at least he was in a different place. Red rock and dusty land, sprinkled with scrub brush and cacti, stretched away from him.

He sat up, not realizing at first that he hadn't been able to do that for a while. Hard, silvery bands were still fastened around his arms and legs like bracelets, but other than that, he was free to move. When all this dawned on his still-foggy mind, shock swam through him, and he looked at Chu sharply, expecting some sort of trick.

The man appeared numb to emotion at the moment, giving a quick nod and scrunching his eyes. All scientist. “The bands will still repress your Chi'karda, boy, so I wouldn't try anything. But I think you'll work with us regardless, once you take a peek over the edge of this canyon.”

Chu clicked a remote-control device in his hand, and the bands around Tick's arms and legs sprung loose like coiled wires, popping off him and landing several feet away. On instinct, Tick reached for his Chi'karda, searching for that spark inside of him that was becoming more and more a part of his instincts. As simple as taking a deep breath. He sensed it—could feel it pooling deep inside of him—but barely, as if the pipe between him and the power was clogged.

But he wouldn't have fought back anyway. Not yet. Not until he knew the best route to fixing all the things that had gone bad in the Realities.

He stood up slowly, fighting the imbalance caused by the never-ending quake that rattled the scorched land to which they'd come. He saw the coffinlike silver box that Chu had called the Bagger off to the side, a small opening on one end creating a window into darkness. He swore to understand what the thing was and how it worked some day. But again, not now. Not yet.

Chu was looking at him, his face hard and pinched. But there was also understanding there, as if he wanted to say that things were worse than any of them had imagined and that they needed to work together or die.

Jane stood next to him, her mask a blank expression.

“Something is blocking the Chi'karda here,” she said, her raw voice sounding full of pain. “The closer we came to this place, the weaker it got. Neither one of us is completely sure what's going on, but it does remind me

of something we'd studied long ago . . ." She nodded to her left, and Tick looked in that direction.

The Grand Canyon. At least, a part of it.

A few hundred feet away, the flat land beneath them ended in the jagged lip of a cliff. Tick only knew this because beyond it was open air and the sight of canyon walls. A sea of stratified rock, layer upon layer, every shade of red and brown and creamy white. Gray clouds churned in the sky, thicker and more erratic over the abyss closest to them. There was a strange blue light reflecting off the bottoms of the boiling vapors of clouds.

"Go and have a look," Jane said, her tone sad and filled with dread. "We wanted you to know what's at stake."

Tick knew he had no choice. Feeling as if someone had draped a hundred pounds of wet cotton across his shoulders, he started walking toward the upper edge of the looming cliff.



Let's Move

Sato fought furiously. Wielding a Shurric provided by one of his soldiers, he aimed and fired the thumps of sound energy at creatures as they came close, barely having enough time to see them catapult away before he had to do it again. And again. The monstrous forms from the Void were relentless and numerous, and they seemed to have no concept of death as they charged in. As each one died, they dissolved into a wispy stream of smoke and shot toward the sky. Up there, they joined their dead in a massive, churning pool of clouds. The bright blue streak of the floating river cut through the gray.

The Fifth Army had spread into battle formation, still braced in a rough circle around Master George and the others in order to protect them. Many of the fangen—or creatures that had once *been* fangen and had been transformed into something worse—leaped into the air and tried to fly toward the middle, as if they knew the precious lives that waited there. The heart of the Realitants, and maybe the last hope in defeating this indescribable new enemy of Voids and mist and thunder and blue light.

Sato's soldiers kept steadfast, picking off the creatures one by one. But they kept coming.

They kept coming, and there was no end in sight.



Tick looked down into the valley of the canyon and couldn't believe what his own eyes reported back to his brain. The assault on his senses made him think it couldn't be real. So many things were going on at once, and none of them made much sense. A thick, pulsing streak of blue light cut through the middle of the air like a floating river, running the length of the canyon just as the real river made of water did. A battle raged down there, and it appeared to involve the Fifth Army, judging from the tall human figures standing their ground in a circular formation. They fought creatures of gray, Voids no doubt. When they died, wisps of smoky mist shot up from the ground like ghosts trailing gray rags until they reached—and joined—the churning storm clouds that hung over everything.

Tick reached for his Chi'karda again, and it was even weaker than before. There, for sure. But mostly blocked. He could pull it out if he wanted to, try to use it, but only a little would come out at a time. It'd be pointless. The strangeness of everything around him was also affecting Chi'karda. A scary thought—he already felt helpless enough.

“The situation is even worse than we thought.”

Jane's voice made him jump. He turned to see her standing right behind him, the wind whipping at the folds of her hood and robe. Chu was right next to her. Tick had been so engrossed with the haunted vision before him—and the sounds of thunder, so loud—that he hadn't noticed them creep up.

“What's going on?” he asked, hoping for answers but knowing they didn't have them.

“The Realities are being ripped apart,” Jane said. “Things have escalated.”

“Escalated?” Tick repeated. “I'd agree.”

Jane nodded. “This is why you need to work with us. Chu and I can stop this madness. With your help.”

“So you guys keep saying,” Tick said spitefully. “I'll only promise to help if you promise to quit being so . . . *evil*.”

A look of hurt flashed across Mistress Jane's mask, but it vanished quickly. Chu rolled his eyes and chuckled, a sound that was thankfully whipped away by a surge of wind.

“Your word means nothing to me anyway,” Tick said, hearing the defeat in his own voice. “I'll do whatever I can to help stop this craziness. But I swear I won't let either one of you hurt more people in the end. I won't!”

Jane looked at him with hard eyes, glaring through the holes of her mask. “So are you committed then?”

Tick wanted to howl mean words at her, but he simply shouted, “Yes!”

“Reginald?” Jane turned her gaze to the man. “Are you ready?”

“Of course.”

Jane pointed back in the direction from which they'd come. “We need to get a couple miles out at least, I'd guess. We can't do anything—especially here—until we can find the full strength of Chi'karda. Come on.”

She pulled up the lower edges of her robe and started running, a sight that for some reason made Tick want to laugh. Instead, he shot a dirty look at Chu and sprinted after her, wondering if the old man could keep up.



The Furious Beat of Wings

"We need to make it to the wall!" Sato shouted.

His throat hurt like acid had been poured down his gullet; his voice was raw and scratchy as he continued to encourage and command his Fifth Army. The creatures of the Void kept coming in their onslaught of an attack, threatening to overwhelm Sato and the rest with sheer numbers. But the soldiers kept their composure and maintained their positions, firing Shurrics and throwing Ragers. With every monster killed, another wispy streak of mist shot toward the sky to join the ever-growing mass of storm clouds that boiled above them.

The ground shook beneath them; screams of pain and anger pierced the air; thunder rumbled and lightning flashed; things bent and twisted and bubbled in unnatural ways. And the gray creatures kept coming—fangen through the air and the others loping and leaping across the dusty canyon floor.

Sato aimed his Shurric at a lanky, six-legged beast with a head that was all gaping jaws and teeth. He fired, then watched the thing disintegrate and swirl into smoke and be whisked away, flitting upward out of sight. He aimed at another monster—three legs, three arms, two heads. Fired. Killed it. Another one—a blur of arms and smoky fur and teeth. Shot and obliterated. Another, then another. The beasts of the Void were everywhere.

Sato was taking aim when claws ripped into his shirt, scratching his skin. He looked up at a fangen just as its claws clenched into a fist and gripped the material, yanking him upward. The Shurric slipped out of Sato's hand. He reached out to grab it, but he was too late. It clattered against the head of one of his soldiers.

The creature flew farther up, keeping a tighter hold on him now with two clawed fists, its membranous wings flapping against the twisty, windy air. Sato flailed with his arms, trying to beat at the beast, to no avail. He changed his focus to the thing's two-handed grip and tried to loosen the claws. They didn't budge.

Sato reached up with his hands and gripped the fangen's forearms. He

held on tightly for leverage, then kicked up with his legs, smashing one of his feet into the beast's face. It wailed a piercing cry and shook his body while it plummeted several yards, almost crashing into the soldiers below. But at the last second, it swooped up again, furiously beating its wings. Sato's stomach pitched and twisted as badly as the morphing shapes of Reality all around them.

He gripped the fangen's forearms again, kicked up with his legs. His foot connected again, and this time he threw his hands at the wings, catching one of them by the thin stretch of skin between two bones. He yanked on it with all of his weight, pulling downward.

The creature shrieked again as they both fell toward the ground once more. This time, they came within reach of two tall soldiers, who quickly dropped their weapons and grabbed the fangen, slamming it to the ground, freeing Sato. And then they took care of the beast.

Sato jumped to his feet, adrenaline screaming through his body.

An odd sound suddenly tore through the air, overpowering everything else. It wasn't just that—all other noises seemed to cease at once, replaced by an overbearing, all-consuming sound that made everyone pause in whatever they'd been doing. Sato couldn't help it any more than the others. He faced the open canyon that towered above him.

A tonal thrum, mixed with a sound like bending metal, rang throughout the valley, giving Sato the strange sense that his ears had been stuffed with cotton. He didn't see anything different or unusual at first, other than both sides of the battle had stopped fighting. The soldiers of the Fifth Army had lowered their weapons, searching the sky to figure out what was going on. Most of the Void creatures had disappeared—when, Sato had no idea. But trails of mist were everywhere, all of them snaking their way toward the clouds.

His gaze lifted; he felt almost hypnotized by the warping and the bell-like sounds clanging through the valley. He was looking directly at the churning gray storm when it suddenly divided into countless tornadoes, funneling down like a hundred gray fingers.

And then Reality itself started to split at the seams.



Gashes in the World

Paul's eyes hurt from looking at so many screens in the operations center, and his stomach was queasy from the shaking—though he was getting used to it—but his heart had swelled about three sizes. They were making progress. Real progress. And he could *feel* the power of Karma working inside of him. His mind was filled with images that he knew didn't originate from his own thoughts.

Sofia had worked the hardest of the three of them, searching and reading every last line of Gretel's notes. She looked exhausted and had finally taken a seat across from Rutger and Paul.

"Karma," Sofia said, almost reverently. She held the gray box with the pressed green button in her hands. "I thought Chi'karda was like magic. Karma's even beyond how we thought the world worked."

"It's pretty cool," Paul agreed. "I think you're right that it's the cause of all the weirdness around us. For some reason, Karma wants things escalated. Like maybe our window of opportunity is going to be short. Whatever it is."

Rutger slapped his thighs. "Are we all agreed on the findings, then? Our theories about what's happened so far, and where we think it's leading us?"

Instead of answering, Sofia looked at Paul. "What do you see in your mind, right now?"

"The place where Jane's castle used to be," Paul said with a smile. They'd had this conversation a dozen times already, and the answer was always the same.

"The Thirteenth Reality," Sofia responded. "Me too."

"Me too," Rutger added.

They all kept seeing the same vision in their heads. Karma was communicating with them. And they knew what it meant.

"Let's run through our data one last time," Sofia ordered.



Tick had jogged or walked at least a couple of miles when everything

changed again. At first, it was just an odd feeling, his ears popping, the drop of his stomach. But then a sound like bells and twisting metal filled the air and everything went dead silent for a few seconds; the quiet almost made him fall down, he'd grown so used to his eardrums being pounded. But then a new noise started up, and he and Mistress Jane and Reginald Chu stopped moving and looked back toward the gaping canyon they'd left behind. There was something incredibly mesmerizing about the . . . *music* that floated along the wind.

"What's going on back there?" Chu asked, his voice full of irritation as if all the crazy stuff was putting a chink in his plans. Which was true, Tick admitted.

"It's changing," Jane announced.

Chu scoffed. "Thank you for that scientific assessment."

Tick ignored them both, staring at the massive disk of clouds that spun above the canyon in the distance. Lightning flashed, but no thunder rumbled away from it. The bluish light that shone out of the strange floating river—which was not visible from where he stood—reflected off the bottom of the brewing storm. A buzzy, relaxed tingling went through his body and across his skin. A part of him wanted to lie down and take a nap.

"Atticus," Chu said, his words muffled slightly as if he were outside a bubble. As if they weren't worthy enough to overcome the sweet sounds wafting from the canyon. "What's that look in your eyes? What do you know about what's happening over there?"

"Nothing," Tick said softly, though he doubted they heard him. "Nothing."

Things changed then, so abruptly that Tick stumbled backward, falling to the ground as his eyes widened in astonishment. The slowly spinning mass of clouds instantly transformed into countless towering funnels, the roar of the twisting tornadoes wiping out the peaceful sounds from before. The clouds dropped then, falling like arrows toward the valley floor below. Quick bursts of lightning arced through the gray mist of the funnels, and this time, the thunder was loud and cracking. When the tornadoes vanished from sight beneath the upper lips of the canyon walls, Tick readied himself to stand and pull himself together.

But another sight in the sky made him stop cold. Gashes in Reality ripped open all over the place, streaks of dark and light that tore across the air. Some were a few feet long, others in the hundreds. The ground shook, and the sounds of breaking and cracking rocked the land.

Tick pressed his hands against the hard dirt to steady himself as he focused on the gaps that littered the sky. At first he'd only noticed that they didn't look the same, that they had varying shades of color and light, but as he

got over his initial shock and peered closer, he could see that the rips in Reality were actually windows to other worlds.

Through the one closest to him, he saw buildings and cars and people—a city at night. The darkness of the scene made it hard to see much, but there seemed to be a huge traffic jam and people running down the sidewalks. Another gash nearby revealed a field of crops and a farmhouse during the brightness of day. Yet another showed a jungle or rainforest, thick with trees and vines and foliage. All the rents in the sky showed something different: a desert, a mountain peak, a neighborhood with damaged homes, people packed inside a mall—many of them huddled together as if they were cold, several views of lands with broken trees or floods.

Tick's mind was overrun with all the information he was witnessing. He tried to process it, understand it. A blue river of light that hovered above ground, creatures from the Void, Reality looking warped and weird, churning clouds and lightning and tornadoes, rips in the air that led to other Realities, more earthquakes. His Chi'karda being held back from him somehow. What did it mean? What did it all mean?

Someone shook his shoulders and snapped him out of the trance he'd fallen into, gaping at the gashes in the air. He looked up to see Jane, her red mask pulled tightly into a look of concern.

"We need to get out of here," she said, her scratchy voice somehow cutting through the din of terrible noises that rattled the world around them.

"What's happening?" Tick asked. In that instant he almost forgot all the things he hated about the woman kneeling beside him and holding on to him with scarred hands.

Her mask relaxed into a neutral expression, but with her so close, Tick could see directly into her eyes behind it. And there was cold, hard fear there. She leaned in closer to whisper in his ear.

"I can sense a force here that we studied long ago. A project that I was led to believe had been abandoned because of its danger. Apparently not. And that only makes our mission more paramount."

After a long pause, the noise and shaking and ripped seams in Reality glaring at the forefront once more, she finally spoke again. And even though Tick didn't really know what she was talking about, the icy tone in her voice made his blood run cold.

"It's Karma, Atticus. Karma's been unleashed. And it's only making things worse."



A Reason

Mothball gawked at the tornadoes and the splits in Reality—at a brief glimpse at one of the impossible gashes that showed a boy and a girl running down a beach, a moving image that hung right in the middle of the air—as she and Sally fought to protect Master George from the onslaught, taking him to the wall of the canyon.

The rents in the air—long gashes that appeared to be windows to other Realities—were all over the place, as if the world was a sheet of canvas and someone had taken a sharp knife to it, slashing uncontrollably. Behind each rip was a different scene. Forests and oceans. Cities and farms. Close-ups and faraway views. The people she saw looked frantic and scared, often running from or toward something. It was all a big nightmare.

But at least the creatures from the Void had all vanished. Sato stood nearby, his soldiers lined up behind him, facing the valley floor.

“Those tornadoes are dropping,” Sato announced. “I don’t know how to fight tornadoes.”

Mothball glanced up and saw them, dozens and dozens of spinning coils of gray air. Even as she looked, she felt their wind against her face and clothes. And it was getting stronger. They had maybe two minutes before most of them touched down.

“I don’t either,” Master George said glumly.



Jane moved surprisingly fast, saying that they had to get farther out of range. She yelled at Tick that they needed Chi’karda so they could wink away before it was too late. The three of them—Tick, Jane, and Chu—ran across the dusty land, ignoring the rents to other Realities that floated magically around them, glimpses into an endless display of worlds and settings.

Tick moved as close to Jane as possible without a risk of his legs getting tangled with her robe as it swished, swished, swished.

“What’s keeping us from Chi’karda?” he yelled at her. “We could use it just fine back at your castle!”

“It has to be Karma,” she replied without slowing or looking his way. “It’s a power that’s both unpredictable and immense. If it’s suppressing Chi’karda, then it has a reason. Either way, we need to hurry and get where we’re going. I think we’re almost far enough out.”

Tick knew exactly where they were heading. Felt it in his bones. “We’re going back to the Thirteenth Reality.”

This time, she did turn her head toward him, a look of surprise on her mask.

“Yes, Atticus. We need to go back to the source of it all. To its heart.”
They kept running.



Wall of Wind

When the leading tips of the tornadoes touched down on the dusty, rocky floor of the canyon, a wild wind erupted. It ripped through the air, picking up dirt and pebbles as it went, coming at Mothball and the others like a wall. She could barely see through it or past it, but she noticed the funnels of the tornadoes joined together, creating one huge cyclone of gray.

Soon that wall of wind and debris burst over the soldiers then swept across the rest of them. Mothball shielded her eyes as it hit her and the others in the back. The wind was like a solid thing, a bubble of air that had a giving but strong membrane, pressing her against the hard rock of the cliff. George and Sally were next to her, fighting to breathe clean air.

Particles of dirt and dust beat at Mothball's face, scratching across her skin. The fierce wind tore at her hair and clothes, seeming as if its force would rip all of it off and bury them in the solid rock. She screamed, but dust flew into her mouth, choking her and making her cough. She closed her lips and looked to the side. The hurricane blast didn't stop—it just grew stronger and stronger. Pressed her harder and harder against the rock at her back. The world had become a haze of brown, swirling and churning.

It stopped without any warning.

The wind pulled back as if it were being sucked in by the gray cyclone like a giant vacuum. Mothball saw the visible wall of debris suddenly sweep away from her. Before long it was gone, completely, and the churning gray mass of fog and mist was lifting up from the ground. She thought it looked alive, and angry, being sucked toward the sky against its will. Even as she watched, it narrowed and compacted, rising, getting smaller and more tightly woven. Most of the others around her had recovered and were standing or sitting and observing the show. She felt Master George's hand squeeze her upper arm.

"What . . ." she started to say, but stopped. Any question would be pointless. And George certainly didn't try to answer. They watched, together.

A few seconds later, it became apparent what was happening. The fog and mist of the Void was being *consumed* by the floating river of blue light.

Every drop of the gray mist whooshed into the still-throbbing blueness, disappearing as soon as it did so. The long sapphire streak across the sky didn't change or grow thicker. It just kept pulsing, kept sucking up everything in sight. Not just the Void, but sticks and loose stones and any lingering clouds that had tried to stick to the sky. Mothball was surprised that she and the others hadn't flown up with the rest of it.

And then, just like that, the air was clear. The only things visible above them were the strange river of blue light running between the walls of the canyon, and the gashes in the air that were like windows to other worlds. They hadn't moved or changed, and there were probably a hundred of them that Mothball could see, all shapes and sizes. But the ground had quit shaking, and all the bending and twisting of Reality had stopped as well. The world seemed to have gone back to something a little more close to normal.

"I'll be darned," Sally said.

"That sums it up right nicely," Mothball replied.

Master George was straightening himself, dusting off his clothes. The Barrier Wand lay on the ground, dull and dirty. "Let's get upstairs straightaway. I hope Paul and Sofia have learned something valuable."



Even Tick was out of breath when Jane finally called them to a halt. He figured he was younger and in better shape than the other two, but somehow they'd all kept up and together, although Chu was sucking wind, hard. Tick turned back to look at the canyon. There wasn't a sign of any clouds or the gray mist of the Void anymore, but those rips in Reality that looked in on countless scenes and settings from all over still hung in the air like decorations.

"I think . . . we've gone far enough," Jane said, her voice even more raw than usual with the heavy breathing that scoured her throat. "In fact . . . it's odd. I can feel every ounce of my Chi'karda. And I don't think it's because of the distance we ran."

Tick immediately probed his inner self and saw that she was right. His power was there, as strong as ever. "You mean whatever's been blocking it is gone? What do you think happened?"

"Like I said, if it's Karma, the force obeys its own rules. We need to wink to the Thirteenth before anything changes."

Chu looked at Tick with narrowed, suspicious eyes. "I should've kept you in those bindings. We can't trust you now."

"We can trust him," Jane said. "He knows he has no choice but to work with us right now. Ready yourselves—since I'm most familiar with the Thirteenth, I'll wink all three of us there. I want us to be a nice, safe distance

from the Void. And we will need time to meditate and regroup.”

“My people are ready when you’re ready,” Chu added.

“One step at a time.”

Chu had no response, but right before Jane winked them away from the outer reaches of the Grand Canyon, Tick saw something in the man’s eyes that he didn’t like. He didn’t like it at all.

Part 4



The Transformation



Round Table

Paul had never seen such a captive audience.

Mothball, Sally, Sato, and Master George—Rutger was busy in the operations center—sat at the conference table, looking at Paul and Sofia with wide, though tired, eyes. The group had made their way back up from the canyon floor after the strange events had subsided, discussing what had happened in drained, weary voices. They looked awful—dirty and windblown and scratched and bruised. But thankfully, they were alive, and every last one of them—including those who’d been researching—were eager to talk about what needed to happen next.

“We know some things,” Paul said to start it off. “And we’ve made our best guesses about a lot of others. But time is short, so I’m going to let Sofia fill you in.”

Sofia looked more determined than Paul had ever seen her before. She cleared her throat and started talking.

“This all began when Tick and Mistress Jane had their battle outside the Factory. The Haunce had helped Tick heal the Realities from the disaster that was the Blade of Shattered Hope, but the boundaries and barriers and seams were still really weak. Sealed, yes. But weak. When Jane and Tick battled, using extreme amounts of Chi’karda to do so, they . . . broke things. Things we might not totally comprehend, but were certainly never meant to *be* broken.”

“We’re talking about the rips in Reality,” Paul added.

“Exactly,” Sofia continued. “We believe Tick and Jane created a situation in which conduits between Realities opened up. Not only that, but conduits between *dimensions* as well. And ultimately that’s what allowed the Void of the Fourth Dimension to begin bleeding through to the Realities themselves. Whatever Tick did to escape the Nonex was kind of the last straw.”

“You mean he stirred the dadgum pot once and for all is what yer sayin’,” Sally said.

Master George raised his hand like a kid in school. Sofia tried to hide a smile and pointed at him.

“Perhaps the situation would’ve been much more manageable had the Fourth Dimension not been so . . . agitated. There may very well be a bees’ nest outside your open window, but it’ll get much worse if you swat that nest with a big stick. I think that’s what happened here.”

“Something like that,” Sofia agreed. “Whatever the explanation, we are where we are. Which brings us to Karma.”

There wasn’t a sound to be heard in the room.

Sofia took a deep breath. “We need to gather all of our forces. All of them. Load up on weapons and ammunition. And then head back to the Thirteenth Reality. It’s what Karma wants us to do. Rutger has already started trying to contact all of our Realitants out in the field.”

Paul half expected shouts and complaints. He also wondered if Master George would feel as if his authority had been challenged, but if anything, the old man looked proud. He had, after all, given them the assignment to figure things out.

“I know we’re short on time,” their leader said. “And I trust you both implicitly. But give us an explanation as best you can.”

“Of course,” Sofia replied. “For starters, we believe that the blue anomalies seen by Sato in the Thirteenth and the one out in the canyon represent the Fourth Dimension itself. Conduits for the Void to reach into *our* dimension. And it’s a little scary that the blue river outside these walls decided to suck everything back into itself. It’s like the Void was reaching out to gain strength and ammunition and has now pulled it all back to its main force.”

Paul hated this new enemy. Shapeless, mysterious, seemingly without any kind of mind or conscience. No fear of death or consequences. “Which is why we have to go to the Thirteenth,” he said. “That’s where it all started, and it probably has something to do with the unique power of the place and its abnormal links to Chi’karda. We think the Void is gathering its forces there until it can unleash an attack we could never stop.”

“Which is where Karma comes in,” Sofia said. “It’s hard to describe it, but I can’t get the image of the Thirteenth—

the place where Jane’s castle used to be—out of my mind. Paul and Rutger feel it too. It’s more than just a thought or a daydream. It’s almost like something is putting it there . . . *inspiring* us. We’re getting better at understanding Karma’s power and how it communicates. But we know this: Karma escalated events, put pieces in place, so that we’d all head back to the source of the Void’s birth in our dimension.”

At that moment, Rutger stepped into the room, his face lit up with excitement.

“I’ve reconnected with Master Atticus!” he shouted. “Found his nanolocator! He’s just winked to—”

Paul cut him off. “The Thirteenth Reality.”

Rutger nodded with a huge smile.

“I guess that seals the deal,” Sofia said.

Master George stood up, a fierce and proud look on his face. “My good friends. I’m sure I’m not alone in saying that I’m scared of what awaits us there. And I believe it’s quite alright to feel a bit of fear now and then. We can use it as a weapon. But know this—our society was created for such dark times as these. And the Realitants are about to have their most shining moment of all.”

Paul’s hands clenched into fists, and his heart started to thump.

“Sato,” George continued, “go and ready your army.”



A Good-Bye

At some point while Sato had been upstairs in the conference room, the blue river floating in the air had disappeared. But the rips into other Realities remained. Like slashes in a great invisible curtain, they peeked into countless other places. It gave Sato the creeps.

He stood on top of a big rock in front of his army, staring them down, having remained silent for at least one long minute on purpose. He wanted them to contemplate, to gather their thoughts, to have a last moment of peace. Trouble waited for them ahead. The worst they might ever face. Master George had no doubt that their fate would be settled in the Thirteenth Reality, and Sato trusted the leader of the Realitants like he never had before.

Finally, Sato spoke, his voice rising up to echo off the walls of the canyon.

“I’ve asked you all to do a lot lately,” he began. “Too much. And we’ve lost some of our soldiers along the way. I’m sorry for the sacrifices you’ve had to make, for the pain and injuries and suffering. I’m sorry for those who gave their lives. I’m sorry for a lot of things. But I accept the responsibility. It’s all on my shoulders. And I just have a few questions for you.”

He paused again and took a moment to sweep his gaze across the eyes of the crowd. He was glad he’d stepped up on the rock so he could see them all—their tall, weary bodies and their haggard faces.

“Are we ready to give up?”

The resounding boom of their collective “*No!*” made his heart soar. Adrenaline pumped through his body.

“Are we ready to quit fighting?”

“No!”

“Do we fear an enemy we don’t understand?”

“No!”

“Will we go and fight no matter what fate brings?”

“Yes!”

“Will we fight?” He screamed it now, energy surging through the air like

electric charges.

“Yes!”

“Will we win?”

“Yes!”

“Will we win?”

“Yes!”

“*Will . . . we . . . win?*”

“*YES!*”

Sato’s chest heaved with heavy breaths. “Then let’s go and do it.”



Master George was back in the operations center with Rutger, and he felt a deep sadness in his heart. There was a part of him—deep down, hidden, but there for sure—that was telling him he was saying good-bye to his longtime friend for the very last time. He tried to ignore it, but it was shattering his heart.

“I’m sorry to leave you here,” George said. “But I fear we can’t win this battle unless we gather all of our forces. Keep trying until you’ve found them. All of them. Can you do that for me?”

“Of course I can,” Rutger said. The short man put on a brave face that hid nothing. “I give you my word that I won’t rest until every living Realitant responds and we come to help you in the Thirteenth. I’m already about halfway there.”

George nodded slowly, his lips pressed together. “Good, then. You’ll know where to send them—we’ll stay in constant contact.”

“I know, boss. I know.”

George reached out and put a hand on his old partner’s shoulder. “My dear Rutger. We’ve been through a lot together, haven’t we?”

“We sure have.” He grinned, as genuine an expression as he’d ever shown.

“I . . . just want to thank you for being there for me all these years. I want to thank you for . . . for being my friend. Whatever happens . . .”

Rutger held up a hand. “Not another word, boss. Please. Not another word. It’s not needed.”

The two of them locked eyes for a long moment, a thousand memories bouncing between them. It was true. They needed no words.

“Very well. Then we’ll see you and the rest of the Realitants on the field of battle. Whatever form it takes. Now, I have a lot of winking to do. My Barrier Wand is going to be very hot indeed.”

Master George turned away and walked out of the room, hoping Rutger hadn't noticed the tears that had begun to well up in his eyes.



Rest and Relaxation

Jane had winked them to the top of a mountain, a craggy peak of black stone that had no vegetation whatsoever. Tick had felt the cool rush of thin air when they'd arrived almost an hour ago and hadn't stopped shivering since. Once there, Jane had insisted on taking some time to meditate and prepare herself for the difficulties that awaited. Chu had grumbled, and Tick had asked questions, but she'd refused to say another word.

Tick was glad for the break and for the time to collect his own thoughts. Everything had been such a mad rush. But instead he'd fallen into a restless sleep, shivering all the while. When Chu woke him up with a light kick to the ribs, Tick was instantly awake, and thankful his body had gotten a break.

"It's time we get moving," Chu barked. Tick wondered if there'd ever been a more unlikable person in the Realities. Ever. The man turned his attention to Jane, who was up and ready to go. "Why'd you wink us so far out anyway?"

Instead of answering, Jane pointed to a rise of rock to their left with nothing but cloudy sky beyond. Then she walked toward it briskly, obviously expecting the other two to follow her. Which they did—Chu a little begrudgingly, mumbling something that Tick couldn't hear. They reached the spit of rock that rose about thirty feet above their heads, and began to climb the slope, a gradual one with plenty of handholds and footholds. As they neared the top, Tick heard a noise like the rushing sound of water in a swift river. It grew in volume, becoming a roar when he finally poked his head over the upper lip of the jagged black stone.

What he saw before him, stretching from one side of the land to the other, was something that his brain couldn't compute at first. It seemed impossible, an image he'd only seen in weather reports and videos of massive storms out in the ocean. Miles and miles across, a wide whirlpool of gray clouds slowly spun in a giant circle, an enormous hurricane of fog and mist, with tendrils of lightning flashing within. Thunder rumbled across the windswept fields between Tick and the unbelievable sight in the distance. And even as he watched, he could tell that the storm was growing, as if with every sweep

around the churning circle, the vaporous gray air pulsed outward.

The Void looked ready to consume the entire planet.

“Because I thought it’d be a bad idea to land in the middle of the belly of the Void,” Jane finally said after everyone got a good look at the beastly storm. “Let’s be glad I’m in charge.”

“You’re in charge?” Chu laughed. “I’m the only one here with the technological means to accomplish what we both want. And you know it.”

“We all need each other right now. And that’s that.”

Chu didn’t answer, but his eyes showed a fanaticism that scared Tick. Something was up with the man.

“We *will* capture the power that rages within that storm,” Chu said slowly, evenly. “We will harness it and use it to accomplish the greatest feat ever known to mankind. We’ll become one with the fabric of Reality, see all things, be able to *do* anything we imagine. My team has it all calculated. We’re ready to move, even though we haven’t done the testing I’d normally demand.”

“My goodness,” Tick said. He barely heard his own voice over the increasing sounds of thunder booming across the land. “You’ve completely lost it!”

“Lost it?” Chu replied with a bark of a laugh. “Boy, you have no idea what we’ve planned! When we add the consciousness of my great mind and soul to the infinite power of the Void and then to Reality itself, I’ll become like a god. All suffering, all crime, all hunger . . . I can make it end. *We* can make it end. Jane will have her Utopia. Finally.”

Tick looked over at the red mask of Jane, which showed no expression. The wind ripped at her robe and hood. She said nothing, which, for some reason, filled him with dread.

“Am I the only left here who’s sane?” Tick finally asked. “We’re talking about wild experiments and fantastical ideas when we have a hungry storm out there about to eat everything? Including us, by the way!”

Jane turned sharply to him. “Atticus, you don’t understand. You don’t.”

Just then, not too far away—toward the bottom of the slope of the mountain—a host of people suddenly appeared, winking into existence in a quick series of flashes. Tick’s jaw dropped open—it was Master George, Paul and Sofia, Mothball and Sally, Sato and dozens of tall soldiers. They spread out before him like . . . like an army. Tick couldn’t believe it.

“It was just as we feared!” Jane shouted at Chu.

The man took a few steps back, a suspicious look on his face, one of his hands reaching for his pocket. His fingers slipped inside.

“What are you doing?” Tick asked.

Chu's voice suddenly boomed through the air as if he were commanding an army through a loudspeaker. "It's time, Benson! Bring them all in. Bring them all. The entire force. The Metaspides, the Ranters, the Denters. It's time for war."

Tick leaped into motion, running toward him, not fully understanding, but determined to stop whatever he was trying to do.

"I'll be right back," the man said with a last glance at Tick.

Reginald Chu disappeared.



A Gift from Friends

As soon as Chu disappeared, Tick had only one thought consume his mind. Reuniting with the Realitants. But he'd barely taken a step when he felt a tingle shoot down his back, and suddenly he and Jane were on the far side of them, off the mountain and between his friends and the churning Void. Jane had winked them there.

The wind tore at their clothes, and the cracks of thunder coming from the lightning within the Void made the world seem as if it were about to split open. Which, Tick realized, was actually happening, in a way. Though there weren't as many rips in Reality as he'd seen back at the Grand Canyon, glimpses to other worlds dotted the air.

"Why'd you do that?" he yelled at Jane.

She stepped up close to him. "No matter what you think, you have no choice but to help me now. Call it a trap if you'd like, but you are out of options. Help me, or the Void will kill everyone. Everyone!"

They stood on grassy fields that had seemed far away just a minute ago. The massive hurricane of the Void churned in a grand circle next to them. It was easily the most frightening thing Tick had ever set his eyes upon.

He knew she'd won. Only he had the power to stop such a horror. "How can I even trust you?" he yelled at her. "I'd be better off doing it alone!"

She leaned into the fierce wind, her gaze glued to the monstrosity in the near distance. She finally looked at him. "And if you succeeded, I'd still do whatever it takes to build my Utopia. Do you understand? You might as well join forces with me now."

Tick glared back. He wanted to ask how she could still be thinking of her Utopia when so much was on the line. But he chose to let it go for the moment. He was going to turn the tables on her. Use *her*, for a change. He'd rely on his instincts, pool their powers just like when they broke out of the Nonex. And somehow he would destroy the Void and sever the link with the Fourth Dimension.

"Then let's do it," he finally said.

“It’s the right decision, Atticus!” she shouted. “Be prepared to use every ounce of our Chi’karda once the time is right! Stick together every step of the way!”

Tick nodded, refusing to give in to the fear that wanted to cripple him on the inside. “Then there’s only one thing to do.”

She nodded, pointing at the spinning mass of the Void. “Walk straight into it.”

“Tick!”

He looked back to see Sofia and Paul running straight toward him, sprinting at full speed. Part of him wanted to tell them to go back, to leave him, that it was too dangerous this close to the Void. But he wanted to see his friends. Desperately. He started off in their direction to close the gap.

“Atticus!” Jane shouted. “We don’t have time for this!”

“I’ll only be a second!”

He ran until they met, and then they were all hugging each other, fiercely, even laughing. Right then Paul and Sofia were his tie to everything that he cared about in life. Seeing them filled him up, something he’d needed so badly. He’d been running on empty for a long time.

“What’s going on?” Tick asked them. “How did you know I was here? Why are *you* guys here?”

“No time to explain,” Sofia responded, shouting into the wind, leaning close to his ear. “We finally connected with your nanolocator, and . . . we figured some things out. Karma, Tick. There’s a thing called Karma that’s going to help you. It’s made things happen so that we’d all end up here. Right here, right now.”

Tick squinted his eyes in confusion. “Karma?”

Sofia put a small bag with a hard, boxy thing inside it into his hands. Paul had tied a string to Tick’s wrist before he could even vocalize the questions in his mind. He felt a buzz inside of him, a surge of feeling that gave him goose bumps.

“There are things we don’t totally comprehend yet,” Sofia said, smiling. Actually smiling. “Take this with you for whatever it is you . . . and she have to do. It’s going to work out, Tick. Paul and I know it. Sato knows it. We all know it!”

“But . . .” Tick was speechless.

“We’ve trusted you a billion times,” Paul added. “Trust us now. See you when all this is over!”

He swatted Tick on the back, and then the two of them ran back toward the other Realitants and Sato’s army.



The Magic Silver Cube

It was almost impossible not to stare at it. The massively huge storm of the Void, roiling in a giant circle as lightning cracked and whipped through its fog and mist. A gray, monstrous thing that was growing by the minute. Master George thought he was being more than careful when he'd winked them several miles away from the spot of the once-great castle of Mistress Jane, but they had still ended up way too close for comfort.

At least they had no excuses, now. No time to look and wait and grow more fearful. The nearest wall of the Void was close, and they'd have to start fighting soon. Though *how*, exactly, you fought a storm was anyone's guess. What could they do but try? Follow the path of Karma and buy time for Master Atticus to do what he must and meet his own destiny with the Void. Paul and Sofia had given him the Karma Drive and returned safely.

They were all together now—Sally and Mothball. Paul and Sofia. Sato and his Fifth Army. Only Rutger was missing, having stayed in the command center in order to gather in the other Realitants. It was a ragtag group, but the best hope the Realities had at the moment.

Sato stepped up to him. "No time like the present."

Master George could tell that the boy wanted to show him some respect, allow the leader of the Realitants to issue the first command. But George was no fool. He was here to fight, as old and frail as he may be, not command. He wouldn't send all these people to their most dangerous task yet without being by their side. Not this time.

"You're in charge now," he told Sato. "Especially since you've fought this . . . thing before."

Sato was trying to hide a look of disappointment on his face. "We only fought the things that came *out* of the Void. Not the Void itself."

George shrugged his shoulders. "Well, they're bound to be related, connected. I know of nothing else we can do but to take our weapons and attack it as you did the monsters it unleashed. If nothing else, perhaps we can at least stop it from growing. We need to buy time until Atticus can do what he has planned."

“We’ll do it,” Sato said. “We’ll beat it, or we’ll die trying.”

“Oh, goodness gracious me. Don’t talk like that.” He patted the boy on the shoulder. “All right, then. Take charge, my good man. I’ll be right here fighting with you—though I may linger in the back.” He gave him a smile. “And we’ll hope that others come to help soon enough.”

Sato nodded, a different countenance spreading across his face and demeanor. He suddenly looked like a cold, hard leader. He gave a long, lingering glance at the nearby wall of churning fog then turned to his army and the other Realitants.

“Line up!” he shouted. “Rows of twenty, staggered by four soldiers on the ends!”

The orders were followed, and soon the formation was complete, each person facing the Void. Paul and Sofia, and Mothball and Sally, were mixed into the group, new members along with Master George.

Sato shouted a command that was lost in the wind, but his hand signals were clear enough.

The Fifth Army started marching toward the Void of Mist and Thunder.



Tick refused to tell Jane anything, saying simply that his friends had given him a good-luck charm. He felt the string tightly wound against his wrist, felt the bulk of the box inside the bag. He was doing exactly what Paul had asked him to. Trusting them. He could use all the help he could get anyway.

His eyes stung from the ripping winds that tore across the fields away from the Void, picking up dust and rock and debris along the way. All of it pelted him from head to toe. He wiped at his face and kept going, determined to stay by Jane’s side as she marched toward the towering wall of spinning gray fog, leaning into the stiff wind. They were almost there, and the sight of the Void up close was frightening, all lightning and thunder and swelling power.

Jane didn’t slow. And neither did Tick. He did look back every once in a while, and it seemed as if Sato’s army was massing for an attack on the Void itself, which seemed ridiculous.

Just let me handle this, guys, he thought. I can do it.

They were a few hundred feet away, Tick’s entire vision filled with nothing but gray mist and flashes of light, his ears numb from the pounding noise, when Chu abruptly appeared right in front of them. Winked in, flashing into existence. He held a large, silver cube about the size of a microwave oven in his hands. The wind pushed his black hair all over the place in a frenzy and ruffled his clothes, but Tick noticed his eyes. They were sane and clear, which,

for some reason, scared Tick.

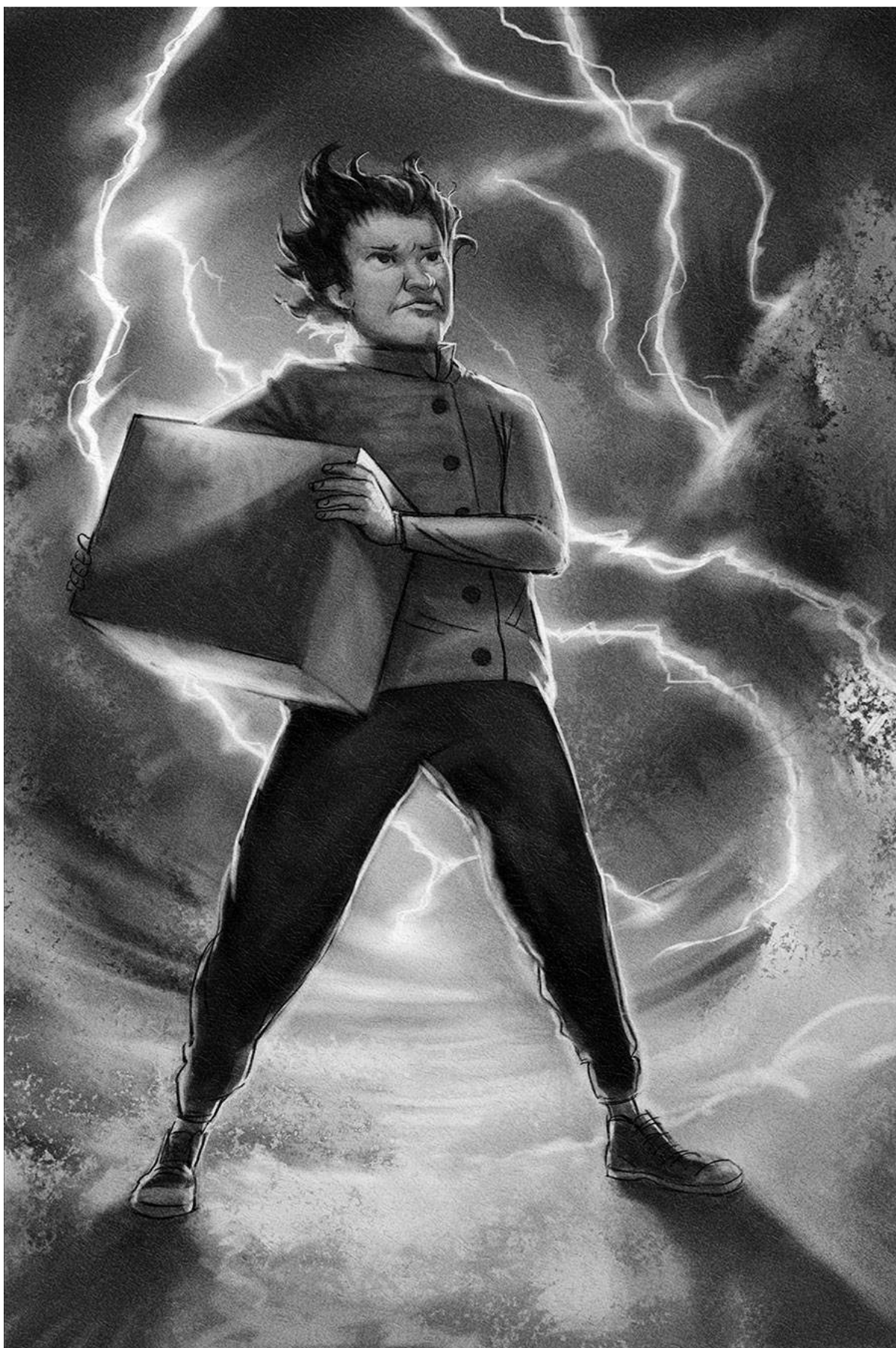
Chu held the metallic box out in front of him. “This is it!” Even though he was obviously screaming, his words were barely audible over the deafening roar of the Void. “The work of more than a hundred scientists! It will change the Realities forever, and I plan to be the guinea pig this time!”

“Get out of our way!” Tick yelled back at him.

“Atticus,” Jane said. “We need him, remember?”

“No!” Tick was done being told how things would be done. “Chu, we don’t need you; I don’t care what Jane says. Get out of my way.”

“I have an entire army about to wink in!” Chu responded, shouting his every word. “With all my greatest creations at their disposal! They have orders to annihilate anyone and everyone in the fields behind us unless you do as I say! Don’t let their deaths, and the end of the Realities as we know it, be on your shoulders! My plan is the only way!”



“What is that thing?” Tick yelled, nodding toward the silver cube.

Jane didn't let Chu answer. "It doesn't matter!"

"It does! I want to know!" Tick replied. And he did. He *wanted* to know. Something told him it was important.

Chu lifted the cube up a couple of feet, and then he screamed out his words to be heard over the storm of the Void. "It's made of the same matter that binds the universe together. A science that only a precious few understand. We need simply to utilize the almost infinite energy of the Void to break it apart, dissolve it—and *me*—into trillions of atoms. Then, with the power of your Chi'karda—both of yours—we can meld and bind myself to the very fabric of Reality. And Jane, too, if she still wishes. We can do this!"

Tick had been leaning forward, focusing with all his concentration to hear and compute every sentence as it came out of Chu's mouth. It sounded like the ranting of a mad scientist, but Tick knew better. He couldn't underestimate Reginald Chu. There was something here, something unprecedented in human history. And it scared Tick.

He'd have none of it. "Get out of my way!"

"Please, boy!" Chu shouted, sincere pleading in his eyes. "I swear to you, this is real. This can work. My intentions are noble! I can make the Realities better with a human side! We can finally create Jane's Utopia!"

Tick thought the man had gone too far—losing every ounce of the scant credibility he was shooting for—when he claimed he was trying to be noble. Did Chu really expect him to *believe* that?

Tick looked over at Jane, and he saw the most human expression he'd ever seen on her mask. She was torn, through and through. He felt pity for her, then, shocking himself. He could see that the promise of her elusive Utopia had gotten to her.

"Mistress Jane," Tick said, but not too loudly. Working with Chu was the worst idea possible. And yet he had no doubt the threat that the man had made was real. And something—some feeling deep within him—told him what to do.

He lurched forward and grabbed Jane by the arm, pulling her along as he walked toward Chu. Tick grabbed him by the arm with his other hand, letting Sofia's bag dangle from his wrist. Then he broke into a run, dragging the other two along with him, fighting the monstrous winds.

A few seconds later, they slipped through the outer wall of the Void, swallowed by the gray, angry mist.



Enlisted in the Army

The noise was unreal. A level that Tick had never experienced before. Loud, pounding, relentless. Gray darkness surrounded the three of them as they walked through the outskirts of the Void. Each flash of lightning was followed immediately by a brutal crack of thunder. Tick figured he'd be deaf within a half hour, if not dead.

At least the wind had stopped. Jane had used her Chi'karda to put a bubble of protection around them, more to prevent being struck by lightning than anything else. It was invisible, but had an orange sheen to it that mixed oddly with the gray, boiling mist that seethed along its edges. It was all so strange, so surreal. But Tick knew they probably hadn't seen anything yet; it was about to get a lot weirder and a lot scarier.

Chu walked alongside him, hefting that large silver cube. Tick wanted to ask him more questions but didn't have the heart to attempt it. He'd have to scream at the top of his lungs, and who knew if even that would work.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Chu balance the cube in one arm and reach his other hand into his pocket. He opened his mouth to say something—exactly what he'd done earlier when he'd communicated with someone in his own Reality—but an odd expression came over his face, and he seemed to reconsider his decision. He pulled his hand out of his pocket and gripped the cube firmly once again. Was it because of the noise? Or had he changed his mind on something? Decided not to do what he'd planned after all? Maybe the device didn't work in the middle of the storm.

The three of them kept moving, protected by a bubble of clear orange, going deeper into the depths of the gray storm.

The heart of the Void waited.



Master George had emptied the last of the Realitants' arsenal to arm Sato's army for one last battle.

Paul held his Shurric steady, its butt end pressed against his chest, handle gripped firmly, his finger ready at the trigger. He had Ragers and Slicers in

both of his pockets and another Shurric strapped across his back in case the first one ran out of juice. He was ready for battle as they marched toward the wall of the Void. Streams of mist jumped out and swirled back, and plumes erupted from the surface then were sucked in again; the entire storm boiled and fumed. All while lightning danced and crackled within and without.

Somehow he and Sofia had been jostled and pushed about by the much taller members of the Fifth until they found themselves along the back line. It seemed like chance, but Paul had a sneaking suspicion that the Fifths were trying to protect them, since they were young and small compared to the rest of the army. That made Paul mad—even though he couldn't help the small part of him that was relieved. His scared side. His terrified side. He was ashamed of the feeling and swore that when they got into the heat of battle, he'd do whatever it took to prove he wasn't a scaredy-cat chicken.

Sofia was next to him, stepping stride for stride, gripping her own weapon, staring straight ahead. She seemed too focused, or maybe even too lost in thought. Paul had the sudden urge to grab her hand and run away from the danger. Shame filled him again. What was wrong with him? He was a *Realitant*, for crying out loud.

“Hey!”

The sharp bark of a man's voice came from behind him, loud enough to be heard clearly over the rumbling sounds of thunder. Paul stumbled to a stop and turned around, even though the rest of the army kept marching. Even Sofia. A man stood about twenty feet away, dressed in shiny clothes and black boots. He was stocky and had a balding head and a red, angry face. He looked like the kind of guy you'd see in a parking lot and turn around to walk in the opposite direction. Had no one else heard him shout?

“Sofia!” Paul yelled, turning back to look at her. She stopped and saw him, then the stranger who'd appeared, her eyes widening at the sight. *At least I'm not crazy*, Paul thought. “Make sure someone tells Sato!”

As she grabbed at the soldier closest to her, Paul faced the visitor again, who still stood in the same spot. “Who are you?”

The man walked up to him, an arrogant smirk on his face. “I'm from the Fourth Reality. Name's Benson. Who are you?”

“Uh . . . Paul. What . . . why are you here?” Something weird was going on, and Paul hoped Sato would send some people back quickly to help him out.

The stranger smiled, though it was full of anything but kindness. “I work for a very important man, kid. His name is Reginald Chu. Ever heard of him?”

Paul swallowed, the weirdness of the situation turning to fear. He took a

step back and pointed his Shurric at the man. “Don’t move.”

Benson laughed. “No need to shoot, son. Just letting you know that my boss—he doesn’t like me to call him that, which is a shame, don’t ya think?—well, my boss said that if I don’t hear from him, I’m supposed to come in here and start attacking anything and everything I see. You understand?”

“You?” Paul asked, his finger itching at the trigger. “By yourself?”

“Yeah, me and what army, right?” Benson laughed again, but then his face suddenly creased into an angry, angry look. “Guess what, little man? I *haven’t* heard from the boss. Which is very bad for you.”

The man snapped his fingers like a magician, and machines started appearing behind him, dozens and dozens of machines and other contraptions, filling the fields.

Paul took a step backward in shock, then another as he scanned the area with his eyes, dazed. But he stopped when he recognized some of the objects lining up behind Benson. A nightmare from what seemed like another lifetime.

Metaspides.



Two Different Enemies

Sato's thoughts churned as he marched toward the Void, wind ripping at his clothes and hair.

It had taken all of his willpower not to charge after Mistress Jane when he saw her standing near Tick earlier. His anger toward her had been building for many years, and this time, something inside of him snapped as if he suddenly knew this was his last chance to seek revenge for the death of his parents. When all this was over, surely one of them—either him or Jane—would be dead. And if it was *her*, he wanted it to be at his hands. He had dreamed of it for years.

But something had stayed his hand. Calmed him. Brought a peace that almost didn't make sense. Almost on a subconscious level, he made a decision. And, just like that, all the anger and the hate and the thirst for vengeance went away. Gone. He didn't understand it, but he felt it all the same. He had a calling in the world now. And he swore to never think of Jane again after he watched her disappear into the gray mist with Chu and Tick.

A murmuring behind him interrupted his thoughts. A rumbling of whispers and movement as people talked to each other, leaning close to speak ear to ear. He looked back at his soldiers, wondering what they could be excited about. He didn't see anything on the other side of the tall soldiers who made up his army, when he heard a different sound coming from the Void. A series of thumps and roars, like drums and wind. He quickly whipped around to take a look.

The giant wall of churning fog was only a couple hundred feet away now, and forms of mist were separating from the main cyclone. Pockets of swirling gray air popped out all over the place and coalesced into more human-shaped bodies than any Void creatures they'd encountered before. They formed in the air then dropped to the ground, landing on two feet that were suddenly solid. The ones closest started walking toward the Fifth Army.

On some level, Sato knew that these creatures were people who'd been stolen by the Void, sucked in from who knew where by the pulsing blue substance that was somehow related to the Fourth Dimension. It didn't make

sense to him, probably never would. But the Void had turned them into monsters, and now more than fifty had already been created. They were coming toward him, as if they'd zeroed in on him specifically.

He remembered all too well what those things could do.

His army would need to attack hard and fast before the beams of pure flame came shooting out of the creatures' mouths.

He was just turning to face his army and shout commands when Tollaseat interrupted him, something he'd never done before.

"Got major trouble, we do," the giant man said.

"Yeah, I'm pretty aware—"

"No, sir! I 'spect you don't! Not talkin' about the fog things! There's an army of machines revvin' up on the other side of us. Looks a might nasty, too."

Sato lifted up on his toes and saw a few traces of silver and what looked like mechanical arms. He didn't understand it at first, didn't know what was going on. But he knew three things.

His army was small. And surrounded. By two different enemies.



Tick guessed they were about two miles into the massive storm of the Void when everything fell apart. It started with the wind, a visible, monstrous thing mixed with the gray mist. It grew to an unnatural level, so fierce and mighty that the sound of it drowned out the booming thunder. And the bubble of protection created by Mistress Jane finally became worthless.

It stayed intact, but suddenly became a victim of the wind, whipping up into the abyss of the Void with Tick and the other two still inside of it. They smacked into each other, rolled around, tossed back and forth like pebbles inside a bouncing beach ball. Chu's cube flew out of his hands, and its corner hit Tick just above the eye, sending a sharp lance of pain through his skull. An inch lower and he might have been blinded for life. Chu called out, frantically trying to maneuver his way through the chaos to grab his precious device once again.

But movement was impossible for any of them. Tick finally curled up into a ball and quit trying to fight something he couldn't change. He bounced up and down, wincing each time he slammed into Jane or Chu, hating the feel of chins and elbows and feet digging into his flesh and bones. The temptation to unleash his Chi'karda was overpowering, but he held back, realizing that flying around in a bubble was better than getting separated and lost, each of them swept away by the brutal winds.

The shiny orange bubble of Chi'karda hit the ground and rolled. Grunts

and shouts and barks of pain filled the air as Tick closed his eyes and squeezed his arms and legs into an even tighter ball. The bouncing finally settled, and everything stopped moving. Tick, filled with nausea, looked up to see that not much was different from before. The orange sheen of the bubble was still around them, the swirling mist of the Void raging on the other side. His first thought was that maybe a particularly strong gust had caught them from underneath to throw them through the air like that.

He saw Chu crawling toward his silver cube. Jane was trying to stand up, obviously woozy, her robe in disarray and revealing her scarred hands and arms.

“We need to move,” she said in a hoarse voice that Tick barely heard. “The Void is going to keep trying to stop us. We need to move! Now!”

Tick nodded. Chu picked up his precious device. Jane pointed, making Tick wonder how in the world she could possibly know which way they’d been walking before. But he had no better ideas. They picked up where they’d left off and started moving.

They’d taken maybe ten steps when the ground exploded upward, throwing them all in different directions. The bubble vanished for good.



Benson winked away as soon as his army of machines showed up. Paul couldn’t blame him. What good would one human do when you had the kind of technological might Reginald Chu had at his disposal? The metallic machines—some boxy, some round—littered the flattened fields in front of Paul, and each one of them looked ready to kill. The only ones he recognized were the Metaspides, spherical, with long legs and nasty weapons. They had attacked him twice before; they weren’t very nice.

The other machines out there were new to Paul, but just as vicious-looking. A big, boxy robot on wheels with two arms that resembled bulldozers but had fists of steel with nasty spikes on the end. Hovering, disk-shaped metal plates that were several feet across and came to a razor-thin edge along the outer circle.

In the long pause that seemed to float through the air like an air-bound virus between when Benson winked away and when the inevitable battle would begin, Paul could see labels on the closest machines. All of Chu’s inventions were marked, starting way back with the Gnat Rats.

The bulldozer-robot was called a Denter. And the flying saucer weapons were Ranters. The phrase “Manufactured by Chu Industries” was printed on every machine.

Beautiful, Paul thought. *Just beautiful*. Like fighting a massive storm called the Void of Mist and Thunder from the Fourth Dimension wasn’t going

to be a big enough challenge for the Realitants.

The moment felt like an eternity but couldn't have been longer than twenty seconds.

Sofia finally broke the silence. "How did it all come to this? The smallest army ever caught between two impossible enemies."

Paul had never heard such sadness in her voice. That's what hit him with a rush of fear—the realization that they were probably about to die. Not seeing all the machines in front of him. Not hearing all of the terrible sounds of the Void behind him. If Sofia was feeling hopeless, they must be in bad shape.

Paul shot a glance back at the Fifth Army. They seemed confused, milling about as if deciding which front to fight first. There was a commotion on the far side, but it was hard to see over the tall bodies of the soldiers. It all added up to equal one major downer.

"We just have to fight," he finally said. "That's all we can do. Fight until we either win or die. Until Tick does whatever he's going to do. Maybe Rutger will find us some more people. But all we can do—me and you—is fight."

Sofia looked at him with something like awe, which swelled his chest up with pride. She even had the beginnings of a tear in one of her eyes.

"One of these days, I'm going to realize just how much I like you," she said. "Maybe once you're old enough to quit making fart jokes."

He smiled, a ridiculous thing to do when you were about to die. But he did it anyway. "That's a deal right there. I'm gonna hold you to it."

She smiled back.

The machines of Chu Industries started whirring and chirping and revving, a chorus of awful sounds. Then they all moved at once.



A Glimpse of Rutger

Sato barely had time to assess the situation. On one side of his army, a horde of machines were about to attack with technology far beyond a few Shurricks and the other meager weapons the Fifth had at the ready. And on the other—on *his* side—at least a hundred gray soldiers were marching toward him, their mouths already beginning to open up. The abyss inside matched the fiery sockets of their eyes. Pure flame and heat.

They had no time to wallow in despair or wish for better days. It was fight or die.

“Attack!” he yelled, as loud as he possibly could. “Slam them with Shurricks before they can fight back!”

A series of thumping concussions rocked the world as every one of his nearby soldiers started firing. Sato felt a quick burst of pride at seeing a dozen or so of the Void creatures obliterated into wispy trails of mist. But more came.

And beams of brilliant fire shot out of their mouths, like a volley of arrows, streaming up toward the sky then back down toward the Fifth Army.

“Take cover!” Sato shouted, but the screams had already begun.



Master George was in the middle of the fray, wondering desperately why in the name of all that was good and green on the earth he’d decided to pretend to be a soldier. He could barely hold the Shurrick in his arms, and he didn’t know what to do. He stood there, looking to Mothball and Sally for direction. He’d do whatever they did.

The sky was suddenly lit up with streams of fire, coming from the direction of the Void. The sounds of revved up machinery came from the other side, where that nasty ogre Chu had sent some of his inventions. But for what purpose, George had no idea. What in the dickens was going on?

“Whichaway should we be a-fightin’?” Sally asked.

“I’m a bit bamboozled, I am,” was Mothball’s reply. “Paul and Sofia are back there.” She nodded toward where Chu’s attack was starting. “I reckon

we best go that way.”

The two of them charged behind other soldiers, bringing up their weapons to take aim. Master George followed, fighting the temptation to wink himself straight out of there.

Come on, Rutger, he thought to himself. Don't fail me now. After all these years, don't fail me now.



Tick's body bounced, something he didn't think was possible for a human body to do. But he did. With the protection of Jane's Chi'karda bubble gone, he'd flown through the air when the ground erupted from below, then landed fifty feet away and bounced. At least twice. He rolled to a stop, dazed and bruised. The winds were fierce and hard and loud around him, lightning flashing everywhere, the sounds deafening. All was a gray blur; he might as well have been blind.

He got to his knees, then tried to stand up, but the gusts ripped at his body and made him fall again. Back to his knees, he squinted his eyes against the wind. He looked in every direction, saw nothing but the mist and fog of the Void swirling and churning like boiling water.

“Jane!” he screamed, though the sound was caught up and whisked away before even his own ears heard it. “Chu!”

He tensed his leg muscles and tried to stand up once more. He'd just gotten his balance when the surface below him exploded outward again, throwing his body forward. After flipping and flailing, he bounced and rolled again. Every inch of him hurt.

Chi'karda. He needed to use his Chi'karda.

Power filled him at the thought, consumed his insides with alternating waves of hot and cold. Orange sparkles mixed in with the gray that filled his vision. With a thought, he replicated Jane's protective bubble of air. It formed around him and cut off the wind and a lot of the sound. But there were thumps that he felt through the ground. Those eruptions were happening all over the place. And it dawned on Tick what was happening.

The Void didn't want them to find its core, its heart, or whatever represented its essence. The Void was trying to protect itself.

Filled with the raging power of Chi'karda, Tick went in search of Jane and Chu.



Paul tried not to fall apart inside as utter chaos ruled around him. Metaspides cut across the ground with their spindly legs and jumped on top of soldiers, who had to fight with all four limbs to keep from getting hurt. The

Denter machines stomped around, shaking the ground beneath them, swinging those massive, spiked arms at anything that moved. The Ranters spun and flew through the air, trying to cut a path to victory.

But the soldiers of the Fifth weren't giving up. Not by a long shot. They fired their Shurricks and threw their Ragers and tossed their Squeezer grenades at the creations of Chu Industries. They battled with their arms and legs when their other weapons failed. It was an all-out war, and Paul found what little bravery he could and did his part.

He slowly moved forward, legs bent in a crouch, sweeping his Shurric left and right to fire at any machine that came close. A Metaspide leaped into the air, came down at him. A quick jerk of his arms, a hopeful aim, a pull of the trigger. A thump of pure sound sent the thing catapulting away.

Sofia was at his side, skipping Ragers in strategic locations. One of them balled up into a sphere of ground and rock and destroyed two Denters and a Ranter in one fell swoop.

But people were dying, getting hurt. The Fifth Army was getting smaller and smaller. How much longer could they hold out?

Paul shot a Metaspide to his left, a Ranter spinning in from the front, and then blasted a Denter to his right. Sofia threw an entire handful of Squeezers at a pack of machines that had somehow slipped behind them. Paul gave her a quick cheer.

They kept fighting.



Sato pushed out of his mind the screams that kept piercing the air and invading his thoughts. They were an army. This was a battle. People would die. All he could do was try to prevent as many deaths as possible. He ran across the fields, shooting his Shurric at the creatures of the Void, aiming for any that looked ready to open those mouths of theirs and spit out fire. The other soldiers had caught on as well, taking care to kill the monsters of mist before they sent out streams of flaming heat that were almost impossible to defend against.

A beam of fiery orange came sailing through the air, straight for Sato's head. He dove to the ground, spinning onto his back just in time to see the terrifying flames swoop over his body and land in a patch of flattened grass. It caught fire but was soon put out by his soldiers running across it, looking for something to shoot. Some soldiers tossed Ragers, which proved very effective, often taking out five or six of the Void creatures in one destructive roll.

Sato leaped to his feet and rejoined the fray.



Master George had given up on doing much other than shooting his confounded Shurric weapon when he had a very clear shot. Otherwise he was too scared he might lop off the heads of his own people. He was no soldier, and he had begun to greatly regret thinking he could help. If anything, he felt as if he was a terrible hindrance.

Mothball and Sally fought ferociously beside him, attacking any threat that came close. He knew they were trying to protect him, and it touched his heart. Though if they died doing so, he'd never forgive himself.

The battle raged all around him, an awful experience that made his insides tremble. Beams of fire shooting through the air from Void creatures on one side, horrific machines stomping and scuttling and spinning all over the place on the other. Brave soldiers fighting with everything they had; brave soldiers dying. Shurrics pounding, Ragers smashing, Squeezers breaking apart machines, people screaming.

The battle was everywhere.

There was a squeal of metal against metal next to him, followed by a solid thump and the quake of earth at his feet. He stumbled as he turned to see what had happened then almost fell at the sight of a huge machine, silver and black with dark rubber wheels, appearing at his side. The robot had two huge mechanical arms that ended in spiked fists of steel. George looked in fright at the letters written across the chest of the beast:

Denter

Manufactured by Chu Industries

He'd barely read the last word when the robot raised an arm up into the air and swung it back down. The metal fist and its spikes dug into George's chest, and then lifted him up and threw him through the air like a discarded piece of trash. Pain erupted through every single cell of his body, a flashing burn of hurt that made his mind want to shut down. He flailed with his arms as he flew, saw blood dripping from his skin, watched as the ground rushed up at him. He slammed down, and every last ounce of breath escaped from his lungs.

He landed in a way that turned his face to the fields beyond the battle, toward a spot that had been empty when the fighting started. But now he saw a sight that lifted his heart despite the pain that ripped through him. A short, round ball of a man, waving his little arms frantically, as if giving orders. Behind him, hundreds—maybe even thousands—of people had appeared, wielding all manner of weapons.

Rutger had done it. He'd found the other Realitants and come to the rescue.

Master George ached like the end of the world. He closed his eyes, wondering if it might be the last time he ever did so.



A Dead Body

The Void was throwing everything it had at Tick. He doubted if he'd ever understand how the thing worked—if it was alive or a mindless pool of unchecked power. But it seemed to be thinking now, and it didn't want him to take another step toward the elusive core that made up its heart.

The ground exploded all around him, like the spray from a breaching whale. The bubble he'd created with his Chi'karda did nothing against that, throwing him left and right. He'd get up only to have it happen all over again.

Great spouts of flames and lava rained down from above, like descending angels of fiery destruction. Tick had to stop and focus each time they hit, throwing his power out to keep the shield from breaking down. Lightning split the air in any direction he looked, its sound like a thousand locomotives next to his ears. His head felt numb through and through.

Balls of mist solidified, pounding on his protection like an angry kid trying to break through a piggy bank. Each wallop sent a vibration of pain through his bones, and he threw even more of his thoughts into controlling the flow of Chi'karda. All while the ground continued to explode and throw his body around, all while fire rained from the sky, all while lightning tried to strike its way into any opening it might suddenly find. All with the horrible, horrible noise of the world breaking in half. Tick was rattled, and he knew it. But he forced himself to keep his wits intact, to not let the fear and panic win over his nerves.

He dealt with the chaos, doing his best to keep moving in the general direction he thought Jane had indicated, and relying on his instincts. Relying on some inner sense that he didn't even comprehend. He was just moving now. Moving forward, not backward. Guided by what, he didn't know. But guided by something.

A body lay up ahead, its arms and legs sprawled in impossible positions. Lifeless. A silver cube was perched in a pile of rubble right next to it.

Tick walked up to the spot and stood over the dead form of Reginald Chu.



Paul heard the shouts and cheers first. Then he noticed that most of the machines had stopped in the middle of whatever havoc they'd been inflicting. His soldiers turned to look at something in the distance.

Haggard, beat, exhausted. That was Paul. His arms and legs felt like rubber, and he hurt in roughly seventy-five places. He'd run and jumped and dodged and dove and shot both of his Shurricks almost to their limit. He'd been hit and swept aside by machines. A spinning Ranter had almost taken his head clean off, but Sofia had saved him with a quick burst from her Shurric. It had been her last charge, because she then tossed the weapon aside and started throwing the few Ragers she had left.

It was a miracle, but both of them were still alive. And now something new was happening. Something was going on.

He ran up to her, grabbed her by the hand. She was filthy and bloody and bruised. But she didn't protest and went with him as they zigzagged their way through the crowd of tall soldiers from the Fifth Reality. It was as if the very air had changed—gotten brighter. The mood had visibly lifted.

He saw why, when they finally made it to a break in the people and machines. Hundreds and hundreds of people—dressed in oranges and reds and browns and blacks and turbans and robes and jeans and sandals and every color and type of clothing he'd ever imagined, and many that he hadn't—were charging the enemies on both sides. Somewhere in the middle of all that, he thought he saw Rutger.

Rutger.

He and Sofia exchanged a glance, then turned to look at the churning hurricane of fog and mist and lightning. It was still growling and angry. Getting bigger.

Then Paul spotted Master George, lying on his stomach.

Not moving.



Sato had been on the verge of giving up. He hated to admit it to himself, but the truth was the truth. Cold, hard Reality. They were outnumbered, outmanned, and almost out of weaponry. The creatures from the Void kept coming, shooting their beams of flame. The world rocked with thunder and screams.

But now they had help.

A sea of people, dressed in all kinds of clothes, surged forward. They carried all kinds of weapons, some of which Sato had never seen before: red tubes looped around shoulders, connecting a backpack to nozzles held in both

hands; long poles with electricity sparking on the end; cubes of blue metal that glowed with a brilliant light. The people came down the slope to join the battle, most of them roaring, eyes aflame. Sato saw Rutger in their midst, cheering them on.

The tide had turned.



Jane limped up to Tick as he stared down at the lifeless face of Reginald Chu. She slipped through the protective bubble of his Chi'karda and put a scarred hand on his shoulder. He turned to face her and saw the mask, which was half-melted. There was only one eye now, half a mouth. Everything else was a smeared ruin of metal. He probably would've gasped from shock if he hadn't felt so numb inside.

"He never had a chance," she said.

Tick looked over at the silver cube, a third of it buried in a pile of rock and dirt. Something had taken hold of him inside. A presence. An unmistakable feeling in his heart and unexpected thoughts in his mind that he knew weren't his own. It was pure power—a lot like Chi'karda in how he could sense it. Where it had come from, he had no idea. But a clear path had suddenly opened before him. It hurt him—hurt him deeply—but he knew he couldn't stray from it.

Karma. Sofia had called it Karma. He touched a finger to the bag she and Paul had tied to his wrist. Everything in the world was now crystal clear in his mind. He knew his destiny and how to find it.

He walked over and picked up the cube. He turned to Jane.

"I need your help!" he shouted.

She nodded, and he wondered if she felt the power's presence as well. It was like electricity in the air, and warmth in his veins. Unmistakably *there*.

Jane pointed to her right. "The heart of the Void is that way. We're close now."

Tick and Mistress Jane headed for their destiny—and their doom.



Becoming One

The ground trembled and shook as they walked across it. Tick's mind was more focused than ever now, as if some miracle drug had been pumped through his veins. His hold on Chi'karda was absolute.

He was ready for anything.

The winds swept past in torrential gusts, but they did nothing to even stir his clothes. Without hardly thinking about it, his bubble of protection stayed true, as did Jane's. They'd even learned to control the earthquakes beneath them, squashing their force before they could lift their feet off the ground. The Void noticed, and quit trying. Fists of fog continued to form in the mist, pounding at their shields, thumping and bumping. Nothing broke through.

They kept walking. Tick hugged the silver cube to his chest. That unseen presence that had filled him left him with no doubt that the object was vital to what awaited. Everything was about to come to a head.

A brightness began to lighten the air, like the beginnings of dawn. It had a blue tint to it, and it either thinned out the fog and mist or just made it easier to see. But the feel of the air around them was changing. And then it appeared before their eyes. Not gradually, and not from a distance, growing in size. It was suddenly just *there*, as if they'd been catapulted three miles forward without feeling anything.

A thick shaft of pure blue light, blinding in its brilliance. It came from the sky and tunneled into the ground, running in both directions as far as Tick could see. The perfectly round cylinder was at least fifty feet wide, the radiance within its core pulsing like a heartbeat.

Tick squinted and held up his hands, peeking through his fingers. It was impossible to look at the light for more than a second or two, but there was something incredibly beautiful and mesmerizing about its steady beat of flashing brightness. The purity of its blue. The hum and buzz emanating from it. Tick felt it in the air and in the ground beneath his feet. The steady roar and pounding of a thousand waterfalls.

It was energy and life and power, unlimited and daunting. Tick had to fight to not lose himself to the awesomeness of it all.

“The core of the Void!” Jane shouted.

Tick nodded. He knew that already. Just as he knew what needed to be done. Just as he knew that Mistress Jane would never leave this place, and that he’d never be the same.

He turned to her, finally breaking his trancelike state. “I need your help to harness its energy! I need you to break apart the cube. And . . . me.”

Her half-melted mask stared back at him, saying nothing. Showing nothing.

“You know it’s the only way!” he yelled. She *had* to know.

“It’s going to fight us,” she finally replied.

Tick nodded.

She paused again. “You have to promise me, Atticus! Promise me!”

“What?”

The roar of the Void shook the air.

“You know!” she shouted. “You *know* what my heart has always envisioned! It’s always been about the end, Atticus. *Tick*. Always the means to the end!”

“Utopia.”

“Utopia!” She stepped closer to him, only inches away. “I need your word if you want me to do this. Otherwise nothing matters!”

“I give you my word that I’ll devote everything to it. But in my own way.”

“Swear it!”

“I swear.”

She stared at him a long time before nodding. “Then let’s go.”

She didn’t wait for him to respond. She turned and sprinted for the blinding, brilliant shaft of pulsing blue light. Tick ran after her, hefting the cube in his arms. The Void immediately retaliated.

Things started flying out of the core, all shapes and sizes, some alive and some not. Dozens of man-shaped creatures like the Voids who’d attacked them at the ruins of Jane’s castle came first. Their mouths gaped open as soon as they appeared, yawning wide to reveal the furnaces that burned inside. Beams of lava and flame shot out all at once in an organized volley of heat.

Jane stopped to face the threat, as did Tick. With flicks of his eyes, he directed the power of Chi’karda—bursts of brilliant orange—to shoot forth and meet the attack in midair, obliterating the streams of lava before they could fall toward the ground. The two forces met in a shower of sparks and a burst of explosive sound. Jane and Tick swept their gazes left and right, destroying them all. Then they focused on the creatures themselves, wiping

them from existence with one brutal assault of Chi'karda. Wisps of fog flew in all directions.

Jane moved forward again, and Tick followed. They'd only taken a few short steps when all kinds of animals made from the same gray substance emerged from the blue core. There were tigers and dogs and snakes and mad bulls. Alligators. Giant scorpions. They mixed together into a crowd of monsters, scurrying about the ground, all of them bent on attacking the two humans close by.

Jane and Tick stopped again and fired away with Chi'karda. The creatures' eyes had that same bright look of flames, vicious and angry. Snakes slithered across the ground; tigers leaped forward; everything came at them.

Tick could feel pressure mounting inside him as he picked apart the unnatural creations with his power. Sweat poured down his face. Every blast that took down one enemy seemed to reveal three more—they just kept coming and coming. Jane's arms were whipping around, back and forth as she aimed and fired, like her hands were weapons. Tick just looked, killing with a glance. Zap, zap, zap. The sounds of explosions and the roar of the core filled the air.

Heaving deep breaths, Tick wiped away all of the enemies on his side then helped Jane destroy the last few on her side. They ran a few steps closer to the blue light.

A massive tree trunk, gray but looking solid enough to smash a truck, came hurtling out of the core, end over end. Tick dissolved it into wispy nothingness with a burst of Chi'karda. Next came a huge chunk of steel and concrete, the jagged and broken remains of an old skyscraper. Jane destroyed it. Cars came flying out. Busses. More trees. Homes, ripped from their foundations. Boats. Planes. Telephone poles.

Now yelling with each blast, Tick attacked the objects coming at him, annihilating them all. Nothing came within ten feet of him. Jane seemed just as strong, throwing her spurts of power out like grenades. Chaos reigned, noise battered the world around them.

Still the core continued to throw things at them, and on some level, Tick understood that the Fourth Dimension sucked things away from the Realities and transformed them into these projectile weapons. All of the matter they were fighting against had once been real and whole in a world somewhere.



He'd had enough. He couldn't keep it up forever. Exhaustion was creeping in.

"Jane!" he yelled. "We need to rush the core! This has to stop!"

She answered by moving forward, still waving her arms as she directed her powers. Tick followed, taking step after slow step as he focused with all his might. One slip, and he'd have a crushed head.

Still enemies flew at them, relentless and unstoppable. Huge rocks. Giant Dumpsters. More beasts and man-like creatures. Some monsters shot back with streams of lava flames.

Tick wiped them away with nothing but his thoughts, exploding

Chi'karda out of himself. Jane did the same.

They made it to the blindingly bright core, its pulsing blueness as hot as the thrusters on an alien spaceship. Tick couldn't look at it directly. He screamed as loud as he could and sent out one last detonation of pure Chi'karda, obliterating every single gray creature and monster within sight.

And then there was only the light and the roar of the core.

Jane quickly stepped next to him and grabbed the cube from his hands. For an instant, he wanted to rip it away from her, but he knew what she was doing. What she had to do.

"It's the only way!" he yelled at her.

"The only way!" she shouted back. "Atticus Higginbottom! Don't you dare forget your promise! Don't you dare!"

She backed away from him until she was at the very edge of the core, the shaft rising above and below her to infinity, visible as if they stood on a plane of glass surrounding it. Then she turned and thrust the cube directly into the light.

A concussion of sound and power rocked the air, making Tick fall down. Jane's robe burst into fire, and she screamed, an awful noise of things ripping and tearing. Tick had to shield his eyes. He could barely see what was happening, but he knew her entire body was being consumed. She kept screaming. Louder and louder. Then she suddenly turned back to him, her mask gone, her face a mess, her whole form burning. Where the cube had once been was now a spinning vortex of blue and gray and white lights.

"Now!" she shouted with a strangled, ruined voice.

Tick got to his feet and ran to her. He put his hands into the swirling lights. They immediately jumped out and began to spin all around him, growing brighter and thicker, encompassing every inch of his body. He barely had time to see Jane's destroyed body fall backward into the core and disappear forever. Then he was consumed by light and energy and a million other things he didn't quite understand.

Time stretched forward before him. He felt himself breaking apart, dissolving into molecules and atoms. There was a great rushing noise, and there was pain. He suddenly saw the entire universe before him, all at once. He saw the eyes of every person in every Reality, all at once. He saw fields and houses and forests and mountains and waterfalls. Oceans and deserts. But he had no eyes—his body had been ripped apart, thrown to the very edge of existence.

He and Reality—the fabric of Reality itself—were becoming one. The transformation lasted for infinity, yet was instantaneous. He was everything and nothing. Everywhere and nowhere. He was the space that filled the gaps,

the barriers. He was matter and antimatter. He was Reality.

Tick had no idea how it worked. Not yet. But he knew that understanding would come soon.

A thought formed in his head. He pictured the core of the Void, the Fourth Dimension, the rips in Reality, and the link between them all. The chaos that reigned throughout all the worlds—even the countless ones that had yet to be discovered—filled him. His consciousness brought it all in, saw it all before him. The things that needed to be healed and the things that needed to be severed. Like the answer to a riddle popping into his mind, he *knew* how to heal and sever.

With powers no human had ever known before, Tick started fixing the wounded universe.



An Absence of Sound

Paul sat on the ground, holding Master George in his arms. Sofia was there, too, weeping just like Paul. The battle still continued around them, but Paul could tell it was almost over. Most of Chu's inventions had been obliterated by the new armies brought in by Rutger, and everyone had now turned their forces on the monsters from the Void. They were being destroyed almost as soon as they came out of the churning hurricane of mist. But the Void still raged, still grew. How could they ever stop it?

Master George barely had any life left in him. Each breath was a struggle, and his body was well past healing. Their leader was about to die.

The old man sputtered a cough, and his eyes blinked open. They focused on Paul, then Sofia, then filled with tears.

"I'm so sorry," Paul whispered. His heart crumbled inside of him.

"Master George," Sofia said through a lurching sob.

"No . . . no . . ." the man said through another coughing fit. "It's . . . okay. My good friends . . . you'll carry . . . on."

"Why?" Paul asked, feeling a sudden bubble of anger. "Why didn't the Karma work? The Void's still there! And . . . look at you . . ."

Sofia squeezed his arm but didn't say anything.

George reached out and grabbed both of their hands, seeming to gather one last surge of strength. "Oh, but Master Paul. I believe it *did* work. I have no doubt of it. You'll see soon enough."

The leader of the Realitants exhaled his very last breath.



Sato had just begun to feel some comfort. The influx of armies had turned the tide, at least in the short term. Chu's machines were defeated. The creatures of the Void were being destroyed almost as soon as they emerged from the spinning vortex of mist.

Now they just had to pool their resources and figure out a way to attack the—

The Void disappeared. The entire thing disappeared in an instant.

An abrupt absence of sound popped Sato's ears as if he'd just been sucked into the vacuum of space. His brain tried to process what he suddenly saw before him—empty air and distant mountains and fields and sky. Sunlight.

There was no more wind. No lightning. No thunder. No mist. No creatures of gray.

The Void had vanished.



It was gone.

Paul sat in the flattened, ruined grass with his eyes closed, feeling the warmth of the sun against his cheeks, still stunned. Somehow Tick had done it—he'd defeated the Void—but there'd been no sign of him after its disappearance.

The Void was gone. But so was Tick.

The lifeless body of Master George lay a few dozen feet away; the soldiers of Sato's army lined up to pay their respects. Mothball, kneeling next to the old man, sobbed uncontrollably as Sally and Rutger both rubbed her back.

Mixed feelings would be the order of things for a while.

Sofia was sitting beside Paul, and he opened his eyes when she nudged him with an elbow.

"Hey," she said softly. "You okay?"

Paul wondered how to answer that. "I think so. I still feel kind of weird, and sad, and . . . weird. There's no way I'm going to accept that Tick is gone. It has to be like the Nonex or something. He'll find his way back."

Sofia's eyes fell a little, but then she seemed to catch herself, as if she was trying to stay strong for Paul. "I hope so. I mean . . . he made it all go away—the Void, the rips in Reality. He couldn't have done that if he was dead, right? Maybe he's stuck in the Fourth Dimension, battling his way out."

"Yeah. Maybe."

Sofia leaned her head on his shoulder, which made everything just a little bit brighter.

Paul suddenly had a rush of thoughts that he couldn't keep to himself. All his words came spilling out.

"I'm going to be more serious, work harder. Make a bigger difference. Help the Realitants get back to what George was talking about—strong and rigid and organized top to bottom. We'll start recruiting again, find the best of the best. We can build more headquarters, make sure we have a presence in

every Reality. I think we should maybe even go public soon, work with governments and universities—make a real difference in people’s lives. And I think we should start exploring, see if we can discover and name new Realities. The Fourteenth, Fifteenth, Twentieth, Thirtieth. We’ve got a lot of work to do, Sofia.”

He’d been staring at the empty fields where the Void of Mist and Thunder—and before that, the castle of Mistress Jane—had once stood. But he noticed that Sofia had lifted her head and was staring at him. He looked at her, loved seeing the awe in her eyes.

“I mean it,” he said. “I really do.”

“I know,” she whispered back. “And we’re going to do it together, with Mothball and the rest. It’s going to be great.”

“And fun.”

“Lots of fun.” Sofia pointed out into the distance. “I think we should build something right there. A branch of the Realitants. Not a gaudy castle—something simple. We should use the power of the Thirteenth like it was meant to be used. Before Jane messed it all up.”

“Brilliant idea, maestro.” Paul still had a heavy heart, but he couldn’t deny the excitement he felt for the future.

Sofia took a deep breath and let it out. “So. We’ve made some pretty grand plans. What should we do first?”

Paul found a smile. “We’ll figure it out tomorrow.”



One Month Later

Lisa sat on her front porch and stared out at the trees as the morning sun broke through in the distance and lit everything up. She wished she felt that way on the inside. She wouldn't have thought it was possible, but she missed Tick more and more with each passing day. It wasn't getting any better.

He'd vanished from their lives. Again.

But Atticus Higginbottom—her stinky little brother—had somehow stopped the Void before it could destroy everything. Tick had saved the universe. Again.

Despite her worry, she laughed at the thought. It seemed so absurd and ridiculous, and she knew Tick would laugh, too, if he were there. But it was true. Totally true. Tick was a hero for the ages. At least she had that to hold on to.

The front door banged open, and Kayla came sprinting out onto the porch, her head swiveling left and right as she looked for something. When she finally spotted Lisa, a look of excitement spread across her face.

“Come inside!” the little girl yelled. “Quick!”

Lisa was tempted to be annoyed—she'd just gotten comfortable and wanted some time to be alone outside. She wanted time to think about things. How the world was slowly but surely getting back to some sense of normalcy, how people were rebuilding and laying foundations for an even better future. The Realities were sharing information through the now very-public assistance of the Realitants. The universe would never be the same. Things were changed forever.

But she wasn't annoyed. She couldn't be. Kayla was smiling for the first time in a long time.

“Li-sa!” her little sister insisted with a stomp of her foot. “Daddy said come inside right now! Something's in the fireplace!”

That picked Lisa right up out of her chair. The look in Kayla's eyes showed that this wasn't a silly game. The two of them went through the front door and into the living room, where their mom and dad were standing arm in

arm, staring at the fireplace. Inside the dark hole within the brick frame were hundreds of orange sparks flashing and snapping, crackling like a fire, though there were no flames.

Lisa stepped up beside her parents and looked at their faces, which were filled with awe. Lorena and Edgar Higginbottom had tried so hard to put on a brave front since Tick had gone missing again, to be strong for Lisa and Kayla. But they hadn't been able to hide the devastating sadness within them. It was in their eyes. Like death itself.

"What's going on?" Lisa asked.

"It has something to do with Tick," her dad replied. "I know that much. It has to."

Lisa's mom patted her husband on the arm. "Let's not get our hopes up, Edgar." Her face showed she wasn't following her own advice.

The dancing orange lights suddenly stopped, winking out of existence. Lisa was shocked to see a piece of paper resting on top of the logs—she was certain it hadn't been there a second ago.

"Grab it," she whispered to Kayla.

Her little sister ran to the fireplace and picked up the paper, took a look then ran to their mom and handed it to her. Everyone crowded around to see. It was a letter. Lisa's mom read it aloud.

Dear Mom. And Dad. And Lisa. And Kayla.

You're probably wondering right now how this letter was created. Or how it got to you. More importantly, you're probably wondering where I am and what I'm doing. What I've become. There are things in the universe that are beyond our comprehension—I've still got a lot to learn myself. Someday I hope to understand it enough to explain it fully.

Something amazing has happened. A combination of so many things. The soul of an infinite number of my Alterants somehow bled to me. Filled me up. The power of Karma was involved. So was the unbelievable energy of the Void from the Fourth Dimension. The inventive mind of Reginald Chu and the sheer will of Mistress Jane. It all added together to make this possible—I've become an entity, like the Haunce, a force to help watch over the Realities.

But the details and the complexities of it all don't matter. Not right

now.

This is what matters:

Know that I'm alive in so many ways. That I will always be with you in some form or another. That I'll devote every ounce of my energy to making life better in all of the Realities. Great things await us in the future. But most important of all, know that I love you. All of you. More than the infinite power of Chi'karda and Karma combined could ever express. I love you. I love you guys so much.

I will always be near. Always.

Your brother and son,

Tick

Lisa's mom finished reading, and silence filled the room except for a few sniffles, most of them coming from Lisa's dad.

"Go get Tick's *Journal of Curious Letters*," he said. His voice trembled a bit, but there was a smile on his face and the unmistakable spark of life in his eyes. "It's under his bed. This letter will make an excellent last page to the collection. Don't you think?"



The First Meeting

Paul sat at the large conference table, feeling a little bit as if he'd finally awakened from a long, long dream. Things felt surreal and kind of strange. Different. But good. Mostly good. Today's agenda had an item listed that would never be forgotten. He took a second to look around the room at his fellow Realitants.

There were a few people here he didn't know very well. Not yet, anyway. People like red-haired Priscilla Persiphone, a doctor named something-or-other Hillenstat, or the dude that couldn't speak named Jimmy—the guy didn't even have a tongue. Ew. There were others: Nancy and Katrina and William. A couple more he couldn't remember. All of them had come just in time to save the Fifth Army—along with Paul and Sofia—from being completely wiped out in that last and final battle. So they were definitely his new friends.

And then there were the others. The ones who'd become family.

Mothball, still marked with wounds from the terrible battle in the Thirteenth Reality, but with a smile planted on her long and weary face. Rutger, sitting taller than ever; he'd done the impossible and gathered together all the missing Realitants. Sally, who'd been wearing the same shirt since that fateful day, saying that it'd be bad Karma to put on anything else.

Sato's face was actually a little less stern than it had been of late. Paul knew he was thinking of all the soldiers he'd lost, and the promise he still planned to keep. To take what was left of his army and reclaim the Fifth Reality from the Bugaboos. They'd be leaving soon to do just that.

And Sofia.

Her eyes met his. She didn't say anything, and neither did he, but a lot passed between them in that gaze. The months that seemed like years, the pain and hurt and terror, the thrill of winning mixed with the sorrow of all that had been lost along the way. The ache for those who were no longer there. And an unspoken bond that could never be taken away from them. She smiled, and he smiled back.

And finally, he looked to the head of the table.

To the place where Master George had always sat with his flaky red scalp, his loyal Muffintops on his lap, his three-piece suit, and his Barrier Wand usually somewhere nearby. The old man with the proper speech and the constant twinkle in his eyes. The old man who'd brought them in, trained them, encouraged them. The old man who'd chosen to fight by their side in the end, though he had to know his chances of surviving were slim. Paul had a lump in his throat at the thought, and wished he could say good-bye one last time.

Someone else was sitting in the leader's chair now. Someone very different, having just appeared in a blaze of sparks and the sound of static charges.

A being, roughly in the shape of a human body, a cloudy mix of blue and white light swirling through and around each other, occupied the seat where Master George had once reigned. Little flashes of orange danced throughout the ethereal substance, along with zigzags of bright electricity, like miniature strikes of lightning. The otherworldly apparition glowed warmly and gave off a humming sound. Paul could feel a vibrating buzz in his bones.

There was a face projected on the surface of the wraithlike figure's head. A familiar face that was smiling at the moment. Tick. It was good to see him again. Oh, man, it was so good to see him again.

Atticus Higginbottom, in a form that no one else in that room would ever understand, leaned forward and put his ghostly elbows on the table.

"Let's get this meeting started," he said.

A Glossary of People, Places, and All Things Important



Atticus Higginbottom—A Realitant from the state of Washington, in Reality Prime.

Alterant—Different versions of the same person existing in different Realities. It is extremely dangerous for Alterants to meet one another.

Annika—A spy for the Realitants who was killed by a pack of fangen.

Bagger—A large device from Chu Industries that can fly and is armed with Chu's anti-Chi'karda recoil mechanism.

Barf Scarf—The red-and-black scarf that Tick used to wear at all times to hide the ugly birthmark on his neck.

Barrier Wand—The device used to wink people and things between Realities and between heavily concentrated places of Chi'karda within the same Reality. Works very easily with inanimate objects, and can place them almost anywhere. To transport humans, they must be in a place concentrated with Chi'karda (like a cemetery) and have a nanolocator that transmits their location to the Wand. The wand is useless without the Chi'karda Drive, which channels and magnifies the mysterious power.

Barrier Staff—A special Barrier Wand created by Mistress Jane.

Benson—A servant of Reginald Chu in the Fourth Reality.

Bermuda Triangle—The most concentrated area of Chi'karda in each Reality. Still unknown as to why.

Billy "The Goat" Cooper—Tick's biggest nemesis at Jackson Middle School.

Blade of Shattered Hope—A weapon created by Mistress Jane that allows her to harness the power of dark matter and utilize the linking of her Alterants to sever a Reality from existence.

Bryan Cannon—A fisherman in Reality Prime.

Bugaboo Soldiers—The nemeses of the Fifth Reality, these assassins are bent on taking over their world. Often dressed as clowns, they are very unstable.

Chi'karda—The mysterious force that controls Quantum Physics. It is the scientific embodiment of conviction and choice, which in reality, rules the universe. Responsible for creating the different Realities.

Chi'karda Drive—The invention that revolutionized the universe by harnessing, magnifying, and controlling Chi'karda. It has long been believed that travel between Realities is impossible without it.

Chu Industries—The company that practically rules the world of the Fourth Reality. Known for countless inventions and technologies, including many that are malicious in nature.

Command Center—Master George's headquarters in the Bermuda Triangle, where Chi'karda levels are monitored, and to where his many nanolocators report various types of information.

Darkin (Dark Infinity) Project—A menacing, giant device created by Reginald Chu of the Fourth Reality to manipulate others' minds. Destroyed by Tick.

Denter—A robot built by Chu Industries that is like a bulldozer with metal fists sporting spikes at the ends.

Earwig Transponder—An insect-like device inserted into the ear that can scramble listening devices and help track its host.

Edgar Higginbottom—Tick's father.

Entropy—The law of nature that states all things move toward destruction. Related to fragmentation.

Factory, The—Located in the Thirteenth Reality, it is where Mistress Jane "manufactures" her abominable creations.

Fangen—A creature created by Mistress Jane, utilizing the twisted and mutated version of Chi'karda found in the Thirteenth Reality. Formed from a variety of no fewer than twelve different animals, the short and stocky creatures are bred to kill first and ask questions later. They can also fly.

Fifth Army, The—Sato's fighting unit, made up of people from the Fifth Reality.

Firekelt—Creation of Mistress Jane. A monster covered in hundreds of cloth-like strips that ignite on demand.

Fourth Dimension—Another dimension that is as different from ours as the oceans are from outer space. Hardly understood, and with limited research available, because it's never been explored before, the Fourth is breached when Tick and Mistress Jane battle it out after the incident with the Blade of Shattered Hope. The Void of Mist and Thunder is spawned from this dimension.

Fragmentation—When a Reality begins losing Chi'karda levels on a vast

scale, it can no longer maintain itself as a major alternate version of the world and will eventually disintegrate into nothing. Its cause is related to entropy.

Frazier Gunn—A loyal servant of Mistress Jane.

Frupey—Nickname for Fruppenschneiger, Sofia's butler.

Gnat Rat—A malicious invention of Chu Industries in the Fourth Reality. Releases dozens of mechanical hornets that are programmed to attack a certain individual based on a nanolocator, DNA, or blood type.

Grand Canyon—A satellite location of the Realitants. Second only to the Bermuda Triangle in Chi'karda levels. Still unknown as to why.

Grand Minister—Supreme ruler of the Fifth Reality.

Great Hall—A room within Mistress Jane's castle that has a high concentration of Chi'karda.

Gretel—A Realitant taking refuge in the Third Reality.

Grinder Beast—An enormous, rhinoceros-like creature with dozens of legs in the Tenth Reality.

Halters—A weapon that shoots out tiny darts laced with a paralyzing serum.

Hans Schtiggenschlubberheimer—The man who started the Scientific Revolution in the Fourth Reality in the early nineteen-hundreds. In a matter of decades, he helped catapult the Fourth far beyond the other Realities in terms of technology.

Haunce, The—A mysterious, ghostly, powerful being made up of billions upon billions of soulkens.

Henry—A boy from the Industrial Barrens in the Seventh Reality.

Hillenstat—A Realitant doctor from the Second Reality.

Jimmy "The Voice" Porter—A Realitant from the Twelfth Reality. Has no tongue.

Karma—A mysterious force that has been studied for years by a team within the Realitants, led by Gretel. Its powers are unpredictable, but it's believed to heighten the strength of good or evil, depending on who wields it.

Katrina Kay—A Realitant from the Ninth Reality.

Kayla Higginbottom—Tick's younger sister.

Klink—Guard of the Execution Exit at the End of the Road Insane Asylum.

Klint Tanner—A man living in the Twelfth Reality who helps gather data for the Realitants.

Kyoopy—Nickname used by the Realitants for Quantum Physics.

Ladies of Blood and Sorrow—A mysterious society of women loyal to Mistress Jane.

Lazbots—A robotic device of Chu Industries outfitted with incinerating lasers.

Lemon Fortress—Mistress Jane’s castle in the Thirteenth Reality.

Lisa Higginbottom—Tick’s older sister.

Lorena Higginbottom—Tick’s mother.

Mabel Fredrickson—Tick’s great-aunt. Lives in Alaska.

Master George—The leader of the Realitants.

Metaspide—A vicious robotic creature from the Fourth Reality that resembles a spider.

Mistress Jane—A former Realitant and ruler of the Thirteenth Reality, she wields an uncanny power over Chi’karda. Since the accident in which she was “melded” with fragments of the Dark Infinity weapons, her power has increased tenfold.

Mordell—The leader of the Ladies of Blood and Sorrow.

Mothball—A Realitant from the Fifth Reality.

Ms. Sears—Tick’s favorite librarian.

Muffintops—Master George’s cat.

Multiverse—An old term used by Reality Prime scientists to explain the theory that Quantum Physics has created multiple versions of the universe.

Nancy Zeppelin—A Realitant from Wisconsin in Reality Prime.

Nanolocator—A microscopic electronic device that can crawl into a person’s skin and forever provide information on their whereabouts, Chi’karda levels, etc.

Nonex—When Alterants meet, one disappears and enters the Nonex. A complete mystery to the Realitants.

Norbert McGillicuddy—A post-office worker in Alaska who helped Tick and his dad escape an attack by Frazier Gunn.

Paul Rogers—A Realitant from Florida in Reality Prime.

Phillip—Owner and operator of the Stroke of Midnight Inn in the Sixth Reality.

Pick—Master George’s nickname for a major decision in which Chi’karda levels spike considerably. Some Picks have been known to create or destroy entire Realities.

Priscilla Persiphone—A Realitant from the Seventh Reality.

Quantum Physics—The science that studies the physical world of the extremely small. Most scholars are baffled by its properties and at a loss to explain them. Theories abound. Only a few know the truth: that a completely different power rules this realm, which in turn rules the

universe: Chi'karda.

Quinton Hallenhaffer—A Realitant from the Second Reality.

Rager—An advanced weapon that harnesses extreme amounts of static electricity. When unleashed, it collects matter in a violent, earthen ball that can shatter whatever gets in its way.

Realitants—An organization sworn to discover and chart all known Realities. Founded in the 1970s by a group of scientists from the Fourth Reality, who then used Barrier Wands to recruit other quantum physicists from other Realities.

Reality—A separate and complete version of the world, of which there may be an infinite number. The most stable and strongest is called Reality Prime. So far, thirteen major branches off of Prime have been discovered. Realities are created and destroyed by enormous fluctuations in Chi'karda levels. Examples:

Fourth—Much more advanced technologically than the other Realities due to the remarkable vision and work of Hans Schtiggenschlubberheimer.

Fifth—Quirks in evolution led to a very tall human race.

Eighth—The world is covered in water, due to much higher temperatures that were caused by a star fusion anomaly triggered in another galaxy by an alien race.

Eleventh—Quirks in evolution and diet led to a short and robust human race.

Thirteenth—Somehow a mutated and very powerful version of Chi'karda exists here.

Reality Echo—An object that literally exists in two Realities at once, making the object indestructible.

Reginald Chu—Tick's science teacher in Reality Prime. Also the person in the Fourth Reality who founded Chu Industries and turned it into a worldwide empire. They are Alterants of each other.

Renee—An inmate at the End of the Road Insane Asylum.

Ripple Quake—A violent geological disaster caused by a massive disturbance in Chi'karda.

Rutger—A Realitant from the Eleventh Reality.

Sally T. Jones—A Realitant from the Tenth Reality.

Sato—A Realitant from Japan in Reality Prime.

Sato Tadashi—Former Grand Minister of the Fifth Reality, killed by the Bugaboo soldiers. An Alterant of the Realitant Sato.

Shockpulse—An injection of highly concentrated electromagnetic nanobots that seek out and destroy the tiny components of a nanolocator, rendering it useless.

Shurric—Short for Sonic Hurricaner, this weapon is the more powerful version of the Sound Slicer. Shoots out a heavily concentrated force of sound waves, almost too low for the human ear to register but powerful enough to destroy just about anything in its direct path.

Sleeks—Creations of Mistress Jane. Wispy and strong, lightning fast. They guard the forest that surrounds the Factory.

Slinkbeast—A vicious creature that lives in the Mountains of Sorrow in the Twelfth Reality.

Snooper Bug—A hideous crossbreed of birds and insects created by the mutated power of the Chi’karda in the Thirteenth Reality. Can detect any known weapon or poison and can kill with one quick strike of its needle-nosed beak. Pets of Mistress Jane.

Sofia Pacini—A Realitant from Italy in Reality Prime.

Soulikens—An imprint or stamp on Reality, created by natural energy and Chi’karda, that becomes a lingering piece of one’s self that will never cease to exist.

Sound Slicer—A small weapon outdated by the much more powerful Shurric.

Spinner—A special device that shoots out a circular plane of laser light, displaying video images on its surface.

Squeezers—A grenade that shoots out strong wires that contract and curl up.

Tick—Nickname for Atticus Higginbottom.

Tingle Wraith—A collection of microscopic animals from the Second Reality, called spilphens, that can form together into a cloud while rubbing against each other to make a horrible sound called the Death Siren.

Tollaseat—Mothball’s father, from the Fifth Reality.

Void of Mist and Thunder—An elusive, mysterious, extremely dangerous entity that has been trapped within the Fourth Dimension since before mankind.

Voids—Tick’s name for the monstrous creations that are spawned from the Void of Mist and Thunder.

Waterkelt—Creation of Mistress Jane. A monster made completely out of water.

William Schmidt—A Realitant from the Third Reality.

Windasill—Mothball’s mother, from the Fifth Reality.

Windbike—An invention of Chu Industries, this vehicle is a motorcycle that can fly, consuming hydrogen out of the air for its fuel. Based on an extremely complex gravity-manipulation theorem first proposed by Reginald Chu.

Winking—The act of traveling between or within Realities by use of a Barrier

Wand. Causes a slight tingle to the skin on one's shoulders and back.

Discussion Questions



1. Tick has to make some really difficult decisions in this book, many of which relate to working with the two people he sees as his mortal enemies: Chu and Mistress Jane. Could you work with someone you hate in order to bring about the greater good? What would that be like?
2. This last book is full of adventure and peril. Which scene did you think was the most intense? Were you ever scared that one of the four best friends would die? How would you react in such scary situations?
3. The bond of friendship between Tick and his friends becomes stronger throughout the series. Why do you think that is so? How do their experiences together create that special bond? Do you have someone you are not related to that you'd be willing to risk your life for?
4. How did you feel about Master George throughout the series? How did his death affect you? Did it seem inevitable? Do you believe that the next generation is now ready to take over the Realitants?
5. How do you feel about the role of Karma in the story? Is it symbolic of anything to you? Do you believe in any kind of higher power that might give you just the nudge you need when you need it the most?
6. At the end of the book, Tick makes an incredible and ultimate sacrifice to save the world. Would you have had the courage to do the same thing? How do you think he felt?
7. What is your interpretation of what Tick has become at the end of the book? How powerful is he? What do you think his role will be with the Realitants? What would a typical day be like for him?
8. What do you think awaits the Realitants in the future?